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***REVOLUTIONARY IMAGES OF ABRAHAM IN
ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY: 'ALI SHARI'ATI AND LIBERATION
THEOLOGY***

by

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degree of Master of Arts.**

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ABSTRACT

The story of Abraham, as understood by Christians and Muslims, has always had a formative influence on the central theological dicta of Christianity and Islam. In theologies that perceive class struggle and oppression of the poor as issues distinctly within the purview of religion to address, the role of Abraham is remarkably significant. In re-telling the story of Abraham from the perspective of the oppressed, Abraham becomes an archetypal monotheist within a new reading of history, one which sees God on the side of the exploited masses.

This thesis examines and compares the socio-theological themes connected to the interpretation and application of the life story of Abraham in these two faith traditions. It does so by comparing the position of the Iranian religious ideologue known to many as one who had a major role in inspiring the Iranian youth to revolution in 1978-79, Dr. 'Ali Shari'ati, with Latin American liberation theology. It suggests that the affinity of their goals leads them to use similar methodologies—symbolism and constant interplay between text, context and reader—and ultimately, to create images of Abraham that are as much related to each other as they are to their own faith tradition.

RÉSUMÉ

L'histoire d'Abraham, telle que comprise par les chrétiens et les musulmans, a toujours eu une influence formatrice sur la théologie centrale du christianisme aussi bien que de l'Islam. Dans les théologies que perçoivent la lutte des classes ainsi que l'oppression des démunis comme des problématiques qui sont du ressort de la religion, le rôle d'Abraham est particulièrement significatif. Racontée, cette fois, de la perspective de l'opprimé, l'histoire d'Abraham place Dieu du côté des masses exploitées et Abraham y est présenté comme une archétype monothéiste.

Cette thèse se veut un examen aussi bien qu'une comparaison des thèmes socio-théologiques relatifs à l'interprétation et l'application de l'histoire de la vie d'Abraham dans ces deux traditions de foi. Elle procède par la comparaison entre la position de l'idéologue religieux iranien Dr. Ali Shari'ati, mieux connu pour avoir inspiré la jeunesse iranienne à participer à la révolution de 1978-79, et la théologie de libération latino américaine. Elle suggère que l'affinité entre leurs objectifs les mène à employer des méthodologies similaires—symbolismes et interaction soutenue entre textes, contextes et lecteurs—and finalment à créer deux images d'Abraham aussi bien reliées entre elles qu'elles sont reliées chacune à sa propre tradition de foi.

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Last but not least, I thank God, whose faithfulness and mercy never fails and without whom I would never have had the motivation and enthusiasm to pursue this research. Because of Him, the endeavor has been a truly rewarding and challenging spiritual experience.

PREFACE

Transliteration

The style of transliteration used for Arabic and Persian words is that of the *American Library Association-Library of Congress Romanization Tables: Transliteration Schemes for Non-Roman Scripts* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1991) pp. 4-13, 145-51. Names of people and well known places have not been transliterated. However, the symbol ['] has been used for the letter ['ayn] wherever it appears, eg. Shari'ati, while ['] is used in place of the hamza. Where Arabic or Persian words are used in quotations from other authors, or as the title of a book (eg. *Hajj*), the spelling of the author is retained.

Abbreviations

Very few abbreviations are used. They are:

*EI*¹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, First Edition

*EI*² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition

INTRODUCTION

Point of Departure

A study of the modern struggle for liberation on the part of developing countries is of interest for both its historical and political importance as well as for the roles that religion and theology play in providing the struggle with an ideological basis. Through the development and application of theology, religion contributes to the formation of a historical consciousness. According to liberationist ideologies generally, the present oppression of a nation or a group of people is, at least in part, the result of clinging to a history that they have not written themselves but has been written for them by others. Portrayed as weak and helpless peoples who have not the means to live in freedom, oppression is thereby inscribed in their present. Leonardo Boff, a popular liberation theologian, speaks of a molding of an historical consciousness that supports a preference for the powerful, and of the need to reclaim history from the perspective of 'a preferential option for the poor.'

What is aimed for is a revision of historical consciousness. Until now, this consciousness has been erected and structured upon the ideology of the dominant classes who have 'made it to the top' and who have done away with memory in the vanquished. That is, the winners have killed memory in the losers, so that now everyone's consciousness of history is that of the victors.¹

¹ Leonardo Boff, *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics*, translated from the Portuguese by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984) pp. 28-29.

What is true for liberation theology is true also for Ali Shari‘ati (1933-1977), an Iranian ideologue often credited with inspiring the youth of Iran to revolution. Both endeavor to give their peoples “a genuine historical consciousness, without which they will remain rootless and deprived of the support needed to nourish their struggle for liberation.”² Furthermore, both seek to discover liberating elements from within their own histories and their cultural and religious identities wherein God is a reality essential to the liberating process. “Islam,” Shari‘ati says, “very simply, is a philosophy of human liberation. Its first summons, ‘Say ‘There is no god but God’ and prosper,’ propounds *tauhid* [oneness of God] as the necessary means to that end.”³ Likewise, Carlos Mesters⁴ writes, “Each people has its own unique history. Within that history it must discover the presence of God the Liberator who journeys by its side.”⁵

Abraham holds a significant position in the religious histories of Islam and Christianity. According to Youakim Moubarac’s study of Abraham in the Qur’ān, Abraham is mentioned in no less than 25 Suras, including a total of 245 verses. Of the biblical prophets mentioned in the Qur’ān, he is second only to Moses who is spoken of in 502 verses. Noah and Jesus, by comparison, appear in only 131 and 93 verses respectively.⁶ Abraham’s relevance to the history of Christianity is attested to by the

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ Ali Shari‘ati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. Translated from the Persian by R. Campbell. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980) p. 73.

⁴ For a brief biographical sketch of Mesters, see p. 7 of the present writing.

⁵ Carlos Mesters, “The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People,” *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990) p. 25.

⁶ See Youakim Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1958) pp. 28, 31, 53-4.

Church's adoption of the Hebrew Bible as the basis of its own history and by the importance accorded to Abraham by the writers of the New Testament. Referred to as "Abraham our father,"⁷ his name appears at least seventy times in the New Testament.

By interpreting Abraham's life from their own peculiar perspectives, Latin American liberation theologians and Shari'ati attempt to discover liberative elements within their own religious histories and make them operative in fashioning a world-view among their contemporaries that sees the impetus to liberation embedded within those histories. The aim of the present study is to explore the affinities perceived between the socio-religious ideas of Shari'ati and Latin American liberation theology as they are related to the re-telling of the story and significance of Abraham and to suggest what meaning our conclusions might have to theology and the theological process. It will be shown that while both Shari'ati and liberation theologians begin with the relevance of Abraham as traditionally interpreted, their methodologies and goals lead them to depict Abraham as a protoactivist on the socio-political level.

'Liberation theology' is currently a term with a variety of faces; it is more correct to speak in the plural, 'liberation theologies.' In using the term 'liberation theology,' this thesis restricts its identification to the Latin American context. For purposes of brevity, the words Latin American will not always be supplied. Where the term is used in the plural, it is inclusive of Shari'ati's socio-religious ideology.

⁷ See Acts 7:2, Romans 4:1 and James 2:21.

Because this is a *religious* ideology based upon a particular reading of Islam, we have also taken the liberty to refer to it, at times, as a theology.

A Review of the Literature

Comparing ‘Ali Shari‘ati with Latin American liberation theology is not an unprecedented notion; a connection between the two has often been implied or suggested, if not specifically analyzed. That Shari‘ati is frequently considered a forerunner of liberationist ideology in Islam is attested to by the fact that his name inevitably emerges in publications dealing with an Islamic liberation theology. *Life in Freedom* by M. Amaladoss, a compendium of Asian liberation theologies, includes a chapter entitled “Islam and Liberation,” in which Shari‘ati is one of three Muslim thinkers whose thought is reviewed. Shari‘ati’s influence on liberationist ideas in modern Islamic thought is noted by Farid Esack in his *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*, as it is by Asghar Ali Engineer’s *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam*.

Furthermore, Ervand Abrahamian, in *The Iranian Mojahedin*, suggests that as a liberationist thinker, Shari‘ati was distinctly influenced by Catholic liberation theology through his exposure to their writings while a student in France. None of the above authors, however, investigates the theological or ideological connections between the two in any systematic detail. That has been done, to some degree, by

Kamal Abdel-Malek and Kenneth Cragg. Abdel-Malek has produced a paper⁸ that, by comparing Shari‘ati’s use of Marxist categories of social analysis with that of Latin American liberation theology, endeavors to show that the two share a common point of departure. Not only should Shari‘ati’s thought be placed in the context of Third World liberation struggles, even as Yann Richard⁹ and after him, Hamid Dabashi¹⁰ have suggested, but, Abdel-Malek argues, within the more specific context of liberation theology. Abdel-Malek concludes with the question of direct borrowing left open to further investigation.

While denying that “any discernible affinity is in any way conscious,”¹¹ Kenneth Cragg highlights some of the more salient links between Shari‘ati’s thought and that of liberation theology. His main interest, however, is not in examining those links in great detail (although, true to Cragg’s style, his secondary observations are no less profound and pointed than the more central concerns of the chapter). Cragg’s major emphasis in his brief but elucidating comparison centres on a discernible perception of contemporary society on Shari‘ati’s part and the way in which religion ought to thrust society into revolutionary change. Speaking of Shari‘ati’s intellectual affinity with liberation theology, Cragg says, “For there was about him a comparable

⁸ “Towards an Islamic Liberation Theology: Ali Shari‘ati and His Thought” (Montreal: McGill Centre for Developing Area Studies as Discussion Paper No. 55, September, 1988).

⁹ See Nikki Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981) p. 217.

¹⁰ See Hamid Dabashi, “Ali Shari‘ati’s Islam: Revolutionary Uses of Faith in a Post-Traditional Society,” *Islamic Quarterly* 27 (1983) p. 210.

¹¹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'an* (London: George Allen Unwin, 1985) p. 73.

concern that religious faith should be committed to revolutionary change in society, honest and incisive in the criticism of what it sees, and bold and decisive in its will to transformation.”¹²

This thesis will incorporate the last two of the above mentioned sources in the third and fourth chapters. The first two chapters will look exclusively at works written by Shari‘ati and liberation theologians, respectively, and at secondary sources commenting on them. These sources do not endeavor to create any conscious link between the two systems of thought; rather, they present the major aspects of the respective ideologies from within their own contexts. In addition to these sources, reference will be made, in Chapter One, to the Qur'an and to traditional Islamic sources on the life of Abraham. Chapter Two will set the liberationist image of Abraham over against that of the standard Christian biblical commentaries.

The major primary sources used for Chapter One are two collections of Shari‘ati's lectures, one entitled *Hajj* (Pilgrimage), and the other entitled *Mi‘ād bā Ibrāhīm* (Encounter With Abraham).¹³ *Hajj* contains Shari‘ati's interpretation of the Muslim ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, often having symbolic meaning in both a political and mystical sense. He systematically goes through an analysis of the rites of the *hajj*, demonstrating their potential for revolutionary religious praxis. “Hajj,” he says, is the antithesis of aimlessness. It is the rebellion against a damned fate guided by evil forces. The fulfillment of Hajj will enable you to

¹² Cragg, p. 74.

¹³ The former was translated by Ali A. Behzadnia and Najla Denny (Houston: Free Islamic Literatures, Inc., 1980). The latter is available only in the original Persian as part of a series of Shari‘ati's lectures entitled, *Majmu‘eye Āśar*, Vol. 29 (Tehran: Inteshārat-e Mūnā, 1977).

escape from the complex network of puzzles. This revolutionary act will reveal to you the clear horizon and free way to migration to eternity toward the Almighty Allah.¹⁴

As the founder of *hajj* according to Islamic belief, Abraham figures prominently in the book. His presence is assumed throughout the contemporary pilgrim's journey and he presents a historical model for the 'true' meaning of *hajj*. More specific to Abraham, however, is Shari'ati's *Mi'ad ba'Ibrāhīm*. Sections of this book focus on the symbolic significance Abraham's vision of *tawhīd* and place Abraham in the social and religio-political context of his own time. From this re-examination of Abraham, Shari'ati finds a model for what he believes to be the central mission of Islam.

The main primary sources used in Chapter Two include a book by Carlos Mesters entitled *A Journey of Liberation: Abraham and Sarah Yesterday and Today*. The Portuguese original was published in 1978. An English translation, the version used in this thesis, was published in 1989. Mesters is a Dutch Carmelite priest and biblical scholar who has spent most of his life working among Base Christian Communities in Brazil. He has written articles on the use of the Bible in Base Communities and has also authored several pamphlets and short books for teaching the Bible among less educated peasants.¹⁵ His writings contain copious references to the

¹⁴ Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Mesters' writes a genre of literature which is not exegetical but pastoral in nature and intent. Some of his writings address the common people, and some are directed towards other pastoral workers. His writings include: *God. Where are You: Meditations on the Old Testament*, translated by John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979); "The Bible in the Church of the Poor," *Signs of Hope and Justice*, edited by Jether Periera Ramalho (Geneva: WCC, 1980); "How the Bible is Interpreted in some

Brazilian culture and context. In *A Journey of Liberation*, Mesters tells the story of Abraham from the perspective of the migrant workers of Brazil. Like Shari'ati's *Hajj*, the style is not exegetical but simple and contextual, with the emphasis on how the life of Abraham mirrors that of his readers who, for the most part, are assumed to be people with no formal theological or other academic training.

In addition to *A Journey of Liberation*, some of Mesters' writings on biblical interpretation are referred to, as well as primary sources of liberation theology. The latter include such works as Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation, Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, a volume edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, and *The Idols of Death and the God of Life: A Theology*, also comprising several authors and compiled by Pablo Richard. These and other such works supplement the theological and sociological perspectives gleaned from Mesters' portrayal of Abraham.

Thesis Overview

Chapter One begins with a biographical sketch of Shari'ati and his socio-political context. It then deals with his image of Abraham as a prototypical

Basic Christian Communities in Brazil," *Conflicting Ways of Interpreting the Bible*, edited by Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., 1980); *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, translated by Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989); *A Journey of Liberation: Abraham and Sarah Yesterday and Today* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1989); "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People," *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); "The Popular Interpretation of the Bible: History and Method," *LWF Report* no. 28-29 (1990) pp. 111-117 D; "'Listening to What the Spirit is Saying to the Churches.' Popular Interpretation of the Bible in Brazil," *Concilium: The Bible and Its Readers* (London: SCM Press, 1991); "The Liberating Reading of the Bible," *SEDOs Bulletin* 28 (1996) pp. 164-170.

monotheist, taking into account Shari‘ati’s sociological interpretation of monotheism. The chapter proceeds by looking at three stages in which the twin theme of monotheistic worship and opposition to idolatry is seen by Shari‘ati in Abraham’s life. The first is the commencement of Abraham’s struggle against idolatry—his conflict with the idolatry of his father and of his society. Second, Abraham’s opposition to idolatry and battle for the one God is seen in the Qur’anic association of Abraham, the *ka‘ba* (the House of God), which he is said to have built, and the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Finally, Abraham’s decisive victory over idolatry surfaces in his relationship with his son Ishmael, specifically in the event of the sacrifice.

After a brief history of the development of liberation theology in Latin America and the socio-political context of the church in Brazil, Chapter Two examines the image of Abraham presented predominantly by Carlos Mesters. Mesters’ image of Abraham can be divided into three sections: Abraham’s God, Abraham’s mission and Abraham’s people, each of which will be treated in turn.

Chapter Three compares the two images of Abraham and the theological and sociological ideas that emerge from them. It draws parallels and notes distinctions between them. Finally, Chapter Four draws some salient conclusions from the comparison and asks what they mean to the practice of religion and theology on a broader level.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Ali Shari‘ati’s Image of Abraham

Biographical Sketch

Although no complete biography of ‘Ali Shari‘ati exists as yet in English, several brief sketches of his life have appeared.¹ Shari‘ati’s own book, *Kavir* (Desert),² provides an autobiographical sketch in Persian.³ Despite the lack of a full biography, his importance to the modern history of Iran, specifically to the 1978-79 revolution, is undisputed, though the extent of his importance is debated. Yann Richard identifies him as the person who “did the most to prepare Iranian youth for revolutionary upheaval.”⁴ Analyses of his thought and influence on the youth of Iran during the

¹ The most complete is Ali Rahnema, “Ali Shari‘ati: Teacher, Preacher, Rebel,” *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, edited by Ali Rahnema (London: Zed Books, 1994) pp. 208-50. See also Abdulaziz Sachedina, “Ali Shari‘ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution,” *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) pp. 191-214; Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) pp. 102ff; F. Marjani’s “Preface” to Ali Shari‘ati, *Man and Islam*, translated by Dr. Fatollah Marjani (Houston: Free Islamic Literature, Inc., n.d.) pp. vii-xviii; Introduction in Ali Shari‘ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, translated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979) pp. 11-38; Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) pp. 105-25; Yann Richard, “Contemporary Shi‘i Thought,” *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, Nikki Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) pp. 202-28; Shahrough Akhavi, “Shari‘ati’s Social Thought,” *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shi‘ism From Quietism to Revolution*, edited by Nikki Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) pp. 125-44.

² Mashhad: Chāpkhāneh-i Tūs, 1970.

³ In his article, “Ali Shari‘ati’s Islam: Revolutionary uses of Faith in a Post-Traditional Society,” *Islamic Quarterly* 27/4 (1983) p. 221, Hamid Dabashi lists two further Persian sources: “Zīst-nāmeh-ye Doktor Shari‘ati,” *Yād-nāmeh-ye Doktor ‘Ali Shari‘ati Be Monāsibat Chehelom ou* (Tehran, 2536/1977) p. (2); and “Sāl-nāmeh-ye Zindīgī va Asar Doktor ‘Ali Shari‘ati,” *Yād-nāmeh-ye Sālgard Higrat “Abūzare Zaman” Ostād Doktor ‘Ali Shari‘ati* (Tehran: n.p. 1978).

⁴ In Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 215.

1960s and 1970s are, though relatively brief, significantly numerous.⁵ His influence beyond the borders of Iran has also been noted.⁶

Shari‘ati was born in Mazinan, a small town in eastern Iran, in 1933. His father, Muhammad Taqi Shari‘ati, was a progressive religious cleric and popular speaker, whose non-conformist approach to religion sought to apply newly interpreted Islamic ideals to the contemporary social context of Iran. The elder Shari‘ati established the Centre for the Spread of Islamic Teachings in Mashhad, an institution that had a formative influence on Shari‘ati. Their activities included study and discussion of modern thinkers, including the Iranian historian Ahmad Kasravi.⁷ With his father, Shari‘ati was also involved in the anti-regime demonstrations of the early 1950s.

After finishing high school in Mashhad, Shari‘ati attended Teachers’ Training College in the same city. Upon graduation, he taught in a small school near Mashhad, where he also translated from Arabic *Abū Zarr: Khodāparaste Sosiyalist* (Abū Zarr: the

⁵ See footnote 1 above. See also the article by Dabashi noted in footnote 3, as well as Mangol Bayat-Philipp, “Shitism in Contemporary Iranian Politics: The Case of Ali Shari‘ati,” *Towards a Modern Iran: Studies in Thought, Politics and Society*, edited by Elie Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1980) pp. 155-68; Brad Hanson, “The ‘Westoxication’ of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, Al-e Ahmad, and Shari‘ati,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15 (1983) pp. 1-23; Mehrchid, “Ali Shariati: Une Théologie de la Libération?,” *L’Islamisme dans tous ses états*, edited by Mohammad Harbi (Paris: Arcantere, 1991) pp. 97-111. Despite the title, this article makes no suggestion of any link to Christian Liberation Theology.

⁶ See Farid Esack *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: One World, 1997). Esack notes Shari‘ati’s influence among South African Muslims who found inspiration in his writings for “a theology of revolt against neocolonialism and dictatorship.” p. 33.

⁷ Ahmad Kasravi (d. 1946) was a strongly anti-clerical social reformer, historian and linguist whose rationalistic ideas served to bridge the gap between secular and religious ideology. Very critical of popular forms of piety and of the clerical establishment, he was assassinated by the latter in 1946.

Socialist God-worshipper), published in 1956. That same year, Shari‘ati entered the University of Mashhad where, three years later, he earned his MA in French and Arabic. He was not greatly impressed with most of his colleagues, finding them to be mainly “imitative intellectuals who had very little originality and thus an inability to offer solutions to the decadence of the modern age,”⁸ a concern that literally consumed him. While at university, Shari‘ati was arrested and interrogated along with his father and other members of their discussion group by the SAVAK (The Organization for Information and National Security). This, the first of Shari‘ati’s prison terms, lasted eight months.

In 1959, Shari‘ati earned a scholarship to pursue his doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris but, due to political problems, was not able to leave until 1960. There, he wrote his doctoral dissertation in Persian philology.⁹ Along with two colleagues,¹⁰ Shari‘ati established the Freedom Movement of Iran Abroad in 1960. He also joined the Iranian Student Confederation and helped to publish two anti-regime journals.¹¹ He became involved with the Algerian Liberation Front, for whom he also wrote

⁸ Sachedina, “Ali Shari‘ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution,” p. 193.

⁹ His avid interest in the history of religions and western sociology and the sociological character typical of his lectures have led many to believe that his formal studies were actually in sociology. See Yann Richard in Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 215.

¹⁰ These were Dr. Ebrahim Yazdi and Dr. Mustafa Chamran. The former, a lay religious leader and revolutionary activist, led the Iranian Muslim Students Association in the United States while there as a medical researcher. He became the first deputy prime minister for revolutionary affairs and, in 1979, the foreign minister. The latter, who received his university education in Berkeley and was closely tied to the Lebanese Shi‘i group *Amal* while resident in Lebanon, was Minister of Defense under the revolutionary government.

¹¹ The journals, entitled *Nāmeh-i Pars* (Pars letter) and *Irān-i Azād* (Free Iran), were connected to the Student Confederation and the National Front, respectively.

articles, and he kept a close watch on the Cuban revolution. Not surprisingly, he also became acquainted with the precursors of liberation theology, a fact that is overlooked in most sources.¹² Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre, some of whose works he translated into Persian, have also been cited, especially by Shari'ati himself, as prominent influences on his intellectual development.¹³ These experiences, as well as his studies of European sociologists and socio-political thought, helped to shape his creative conception of Islamic revolutionary ideology.

Shari'ati also names the French Islamicist Louis Massignon, author of *La Passion d'Hallaj*, as someone who influenced him deeply.¹⁴ Essentially an ascetic and mystic, Massignon had little obvious connection with Shari'ati, who is known predominantly as a revolutionary Islamic activist. Nevertheless, Shari'ati speaks of his "master" with great admiration and praise. Hamid Dabashi explains this paradoxical bond in terms of a mystical transformation of the one to the other.

The evident paradox ought to be seen in Shari'ati's restless determination to transform Massignon's ascetic mysticism into a puritanical revolutionary absolutism. The closing link, however, between Shari'ati's fascination with Massignon and his committed political activism seems to be in the long and sincere passages on solitude and sustained and dispassionate love he composes in his *Deserta* writings.¹⁵

¹² It is mentioned by Abrahamian who comments that "Shari'ati later scrupulously avoided any mention of radical Catholicism. To have done so would have weakened his claim that Shiism was the only world religion that espoused social justice, economic reality and political revolution." *The Iranian Mojahedin*, p. 108.

¹³ See, for example, Y. Richard in Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 216.

¹⁴ Abrahamian notes his importance thus: "In later years, Shariati wrote that Massignon had been the single most important influence on him." *The Iranian Mojahedin*, p. 107.

¹⁵ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, p. 107. Dabashi's thesis may be borne out in the present study. Shari'ati's interpretation of Abraham in his *Hajj*, translated by Ali A. Behzadnia and Najla Denny (Houston, Texas: Free Islamic Literatures, Inc., 1980) can be seen as a call to revolutionary political

Upon his return to Iran in 1964, Shari'ati was immediately thrown into a pattern that would follow him until his death in 1977. He was arrested and imprisoned for six months. After his release, he sought a university teaching post but was not offered one until 1966, at the University of Mashhad. He proved to be extremely popular, not only as a lecturer but also as a speaker at religious festivals. His lack of precision in details of Islamic history and his innovative interpretation of Shi'ism earned him the censorship of the 'ulama'. He made frequent lecturing trips to Tehran, leading to the establishment of the *Husayniya-yi Irshād* in 1965. It was there that he delivered numerous provocative lectures which were subsequently published, several of which have been translated into English. His lectures were taped and sent across the nation and to overseas Iranian students. He became so popular that in 1973 the centre was closed down and Shari'ati was again arrested and imprisoned for more than two years, after which he was confined to his home town of Mazinan. His prison experiences are best described by one who has been in such a position.

In only a few hours the torture chamber takes you to your origins, with fear as the only monarch. The meaning of life eludes you, and you are hung in a stupid void in which you are totally and desperately alone.

The torture does not end the first day or the first week, even if it may cease for a while. Rather, it becomes deeply psychological as time

action in the name of religion which issues forth from a mystical interpretation of *hajj*. In his M.A. thesis entitled *'Ali Shari'ati and the Mystical Tradition of Islam*, Abdollah Vakily suggests another view. Basing his ideas mainly on the personal writings of Shari'ati, he submits the thesis that mysticism was in fact "the essential Shari'ati, the man behind his social theories, revolutionary ideology and popular image, the man who lived and experienced life deeply and profoundly." See Vakily, *'Ali Shari'ati and the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Thesis presented to the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, 1991) pp. 4-5.

goes on. You are taken out to be shot and you are not. But it takes you two hours of absolute terror to realize that. And then this very action begins to have such an awesome reality in your mind that later, even after you are released, it becomes part of your maimed subconscious, as if you had inherited it from a genetically subhuman ancestor and you could do nothing about it.¹⁶

In 1977, Shari‘ati managed to travel to England. His life ended abruptly one month later on June 19, 1977, under mysterious circumstances.¹⁷

The Political Context and Shari‘ati’s Influence

From the 1930s until the end of its reign, the Pahlavi dynasty initiated a grand modernization program which, particularly after the overthrow of Mosaddeq in 1953, became heavily dependent on the West, violated the cultural and religious sensibilities of the Iranian people, alienated the religious leadership, capitalized on the rural population and used excessive forms of political repression “including jailing, torture, and killing (the latter two especially in the 1970s).”¹⁸ The so-called White Revolution, begun in 1963, aimed at reform in six areas, most notably land reform. It was opposed by large land owners who had the most to lose, tribal leaders and the religious leadership, for whom it also posed something of an economic threat.¹⁹ Most seriously, the reform movement helped to facilitate the increasingly dictatorial character of the

¹⁶ Reza Baraheni, *God’s Shadow: Prison Poems* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) p. 21.

¹⁷ His admirers, and not a small number of impartial observers, claim that he was killed by the SAVAK. The British report, however, states that he died of a heart attack. See Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, p. 110.

¹⁸ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 144.

¹⁹ See M.E. Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War* (New York: Longman, 1991) pp. 336-37.

Shah's rule and its "subservience to Western powers,"²⁰ further aggravating both the religious and non-religious opposition. As Keddie remarks,

By 1977 an economic recession, inflation, urban overcrowding, government policies that hurt the bazaar classes, glaring income gaps, and conspicuous Western-style consumption by the elite and the lack of political freedom or participation were all widely felt and belied the numerous official predictions that the 'Great Civilization' was just around the corner.²¹

Opposition to the Shah's regime was expressed basically in two forms, the one secular and largely leftist, and the other religious. While the former could legitimately be put down by the authorities as political sedition, the latter, expressed through "sermons, processions, and plays with themes like the martyrdom of Imam Hosain by tyrants were understood to refer to contemporary tyranny, but could not be suppressed."²² Shari'ati, whose following was mainly the educated youth and university students, belonged to the latter group. In spite of allegations that Shari'ati himself was a Marxist, and in spite of the possibility of reading utilitarianism into his attitude towards Islam, it is clear that Shari'ati's aim was to articulate an Islamic solution to Iran's social malaise, a solution that he believed to be a genuine reading of Islam and authentically Iranian. Taking seriously the activist character of Marxist ideology and the perception among the secular modernists that Islam was an instrument of social retardation, he directed his energies into reformulating Islam in such a way

²⁰ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 182. That is, efforts aimed at suppressing them were not successful.

that it would be understood to be progressive in its ideology and politically, economically and culturally liberating.

The originality of Shari'ati is that he was able to reformulate Shi'ism in both of these ways. This, at a time when politically, socially active religion was on dangerous ground. As Abdulaziz Sachedina indicates, the 1960's was "the period in which the Shah's government was determined to undermine the practical religious culture of Islam and its sense of moral responsibility toward social, economic, cultural, and political conditions."²³ He goes on to clarify that this effort to debilitate religion was aimed specifically at the youth.

At the same time, the youth were becoming progressively more estranged from the religious language and mentality of the majority of the 'ulama'. To the youth, the image of Islam presented by the 'ulama' had little relevance to urgent contemporary social and political problems, an indication that the Shah had some success in his effort to silence the social consciousness of the clerical elite. Shari'ati's outstanding quality was his ability to enable the youth to see Islam as the most relevant and practical solution to Iran's problems. As Sachedina states,

The significance of Shari'ati's impact was not so much due to his thorough and systematic presentation of Islam, as to his ability to reformulate Islamic beliefs, relating them to social and economic conditions in order to reveal their practical implications. He saw Islam as a socially and politically committing ideology, open to reinterpretation in the light of modern contingencies. It is precisely this which led to the Islamic revival among Iranian youth.²⁴

²³ Sachedina, "Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," p. 191.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 192.

Although directed toward students and young intellectuals, Shari‘ati’s lectures also had an appreciable influence on “clerical pamphleteers and preachers” and on the lay intelligentsia.²⁵ According to Said Amir Arjomand, the former quickly took hold of his “rhetoric of social justice and the cause of the Disinherited” whom Shari‘ati had interpreted as the masses oppressed both “by the internal forces of domination and by the external force of imperialism.”²⁶ Upon the latter group, Shari‘ati’s influence was to convince them that an Islamic revolution as envisioned by its champion supporters, “would be a ‘progressive’ one.”²⁷

In addition to the content of Shari‘ati’s “reinterpretation” of Islam, a somewhat too narrow description of Shari‘ati’s methodology, we must also note the form in which it was delivered; Shari‘ati’s Islam was permeated with life, as it was in the earliest period of Islamic history. That he hardly ever used the past tense when speaking of seventh century events and that he related these events as if they were taking place today in Tehran, gave his reformulation of Islam an aura of life.²⁸ As Dabashi puts it, “Shari‘ati wished to change, not interpret; lead, not argue; move, not convince; achieve, not rationalize. To do this he assumed a compelling ahistorical language.”²⁹ To throw in your lot with Shari‘ati was to join a growing movement of

²⁵ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 94.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

²⁸ In order to better convey Shari‘ati’s intended meaning and to maintain the impact of his style, I will also use the present tense in discussing his interpretation of Abraham and his times.

²⁹ Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, p. 104.

which Muhammad, 'Ali, Husayn, Fatima, Zaynab³⁰ and, as we will observe, Abraham, were the 'living' revolutionary leaders (and sometimes martyrs).

A second important characteristic of Shari'ati's style was his consistent use of symbolism, a method that features prominently in his lectures on Abraham. The use of symbolic language was, as can be gathered, for a very practical reason. Under the repressive censorship of the Shah's regime, overtly anti-regime language was highly provocative. By couching political vitriol in defamatory assertions about the Umayyids, Pharaoh or Nimrod, accusations of overt sedition could not legitimately be brought against him. At the same time, it may also be said that the use of symbolism can be likened to a particular form of Qur'anic exegesis common in Shi'ism.³¹ Known as *ta'wil*, this type of exegesis elucidates the abstract or esoteric level of meaning alongside of *tafsir*, that is, literal or exoteric interpretation. Moreover, Mahmud Ayoub notes that it "has been through *ta'wil* that Muslim scholars and mystics were able to

³⁰ 'Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet, the first male to become a Muslim. The Shi'is believe that he was designated by Muhammad to be the first successor after Muhammad's death but that his position was usurped by a group of Muhammad's close companions who elected Abu Bakr to the caliphate while 'Ali was attending to the prophet's burial. He later became the fourth caliph for all Muslims and first Imam according to the Shi'is. Fatima was the prophet's daughter and wife of 'Ali, noted by Sunnis and Shi'is alike as a great Muslim woman. Her significance for Shi'is is intensified by her support of her husband against the so-called usurpers. Her biography has been highly embellished by traditional Shi'ism so as to provide her with an intercessory role, along with her son, Husayn. Shari'ati condemns this type of Shi'ism, claiming that it is the cause of social apathy and unwarranted submission to injustice. Husayn, the third Shi'i Imam and second son of 'Ali and Fatima, was martyred in 680 in the battle of Karbala. His death is of tremendous significance to Shi'is; it represents the downfall of 'true' Islam and its appropriation by political opportunists. Zaynab, Husayn's sister, bravely stood by her brother during the battle of Karbala and spoke out boldly against Husayn's rival and founder of the Umayyad dynasty, Yazid. In Shari'ati's interpretation of Shi'i history, these figures are presented as prototypes of a Shi'ism that is in perpetual revolt against religious hypocrisy and social injustice.

³¹ Although Shari'ati is not commonly referred to as an exegete, it does not seem inappropriate to apply this analysis to his use of symbolism, given the fact that the Qur'an features so prominently in his religious system.

bring the Qur'an into the hearts, imagination, and total life experience of the masses."

Though subject to error, Ayoub continues, the *mu'awwil* (esoteric exegete) "enjoys an infinite scope for his imagination..."³² This characterization is aptly suited to an analysis of Shari'ati's interpretation of a Qur'anic theme such as the significance of Abraham.

Shari'ati's Image of Abraham

Shari'ati's image of Abraham should be seen in the same light as are his presentations of the heroes of Shi'ism. The twelve Shi'i imams,³³ as well as Fatima and Zaynab, are models whose examples are to be emulated, not glorified and certainly not mourned.³⁴ "Their lives," Shari'ati pleads,

should serve as examples for [our people]. Their lives, thoughts, words, silences, freedoms, their imprisonments, punishments, martyrdoms, should give awareness, life, chastity and humanness to people. But people know them only by their number, (that is, the 6th Imam, the 8th Imam, etc.).³⁵

³² Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters* Volume 1 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) p. 24. cf. p. 35 where Ayoub notes the emphasis on spiritual purity required for *ta'wil* which is found most obviously in the *ahl al-bayt* (people of the House), that is, Ali and the eleven *imams* who are his direct descendants through Fatima. Their knowledge of the Qur'an is inherited from the prophet. See Qur'an, Sura 33:33.

³³ This is, of course, according to the Twelver Shi'is, also identified as Ja'faris, after the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadeq, who formulated the school of law known by his name. The majority of Muslims in Iran are Twelver Shi'is, the minority being Sunnis.

³⁴ For an analysis of the transformation of Shi'i religious symbols from rituals of remembrance and mourning to sources of inspiration for revolutionary fervour, see Mary Hegland, "Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village," in Keddie, ed., *Religion and Politics in Iran*, pp. 218-35. See also Gustav Thaiss, "Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain," *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East Since 1500*, edited by Nikki Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) pp. 349-66.

³⁵ Shari'ati, *Fatima is Fatima*, translated by Laleh Bakhtiar (Tehran: The Shari'ati Foundation, n.d.) p. 44.

As the first true monotheist, a term of enormous importance in Shari‘ati’s system of religious knowledge and one that we will subsequently investigate in detail, Abraham also serves as such an inspiration.

Shari‘ati’s image of Abraham, as seen in his *Hajj* and *Mi‘ād bā Ibrāhīm*, focuses on the ideas of *tawhīd*³⁶ (monotheism), *bot parasti*³⁷ (idolatry) and *shirk*³⁸ (polytheism). Additionally, several themes elaborated in his other writings emerge from his image of Abraham. Within the wider context of Shari‘ati’s socio-religious thought and with occasional reference to the Qur’an, *qisās al-anbiyā’* (stories of the prophets) and other traditional sources, this study will explore several of these main themes, including the nature of man, vicegerency (in Islam, mankind’s responsibility to be God’s deputy on earth),³⁹ historical dialectic, and the importance of *al-nās* (the people) as the motor of social change. His ideas on these subjects will be set in the context of their relation to the central focus of the chapter, that of monotheism versus idolatry. It will be seen that although Shari‘ati draws upon traditional Islamic images of Abraham, his radically socialistic and innovative method of interpretation leads him to depict Abraham as not merely the prototypical monotheist as is commonly

³⁶ An Arabic word, literally meaning ‘making one or uniting’, understood in reference to God to mean ‘unity’ and in reference to categories of religious thought to mean ‘monotheism’. In the context of our discussion, we will take it to mean this latter term, ‘monotheism.’

³⁷ A Persian term literally meaning ‘idol worship.’

³⁸ An Arabic word, literally meaning, ‘associating others with God.’ In Shari‘ati’s usage, it is understood as equivalent to the Persian term *bot parasti*. The tension is thus between *tawhīd* and *shirk*, or ‘monotheism’ and ‘idolatry.’ We will, therefore, use the more common term of *shirk*.

³⁹ Speaking of vicegerency, Shari‘ati says that Islam “holds that humanity was created as God’s deputy in nature: ‘Truly, I am about to place on the earth a vice-regent’ ([Sura] 2:30)” *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, translated by R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980) p. 58.

understood by the term, but as “the oldest and most rebellious man of history[,]”⁴⁰ a designation that results directly from Shari‘ati’s socio-political interpretation of *tawhīd* and *shirk*. As the leader of “the greatest movement in history,”⁴¹ a permanent and enduring movement of religious, social and political monotheism, Abraham becomes the prototype of a revolutionary religious ideology, which for Shari‘ati, is best expressed through Shi‘ism.

The Commencement of the Struggle against Idolatry

According to traditional Islamic understanding, Abraham is the first person to practice complete submission to God and renunciation of idolatry. Several passages in the Qur‘an speak of Abraham as a *hanif*, that is, a pure monotheist defined not by sectarian affiliation but by worship of one God and rejection of idols.⁴² Gordon Newby notes that this makes Abraham “a prototype for a proper monotheist, the founder of the Religion of Abraham [Arabic *Millat Ibrāhīm*]...”⁴³ In Muslim thought, Abraham’s purity of faith in one God links him to the final restorer of monotheism, the prophet

⁴⁰ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 23.

⁴¹ Shari‘ati, *Man and Islam*, p. 98.

⁴² See, for example, Suras 2:135, 3:67-68 & 95, 4:125, 6:74-83, 19:41-50, 21:51-73, 26:69-89, 29:16-27, 37:83-98, 43:26-28. Sura 3:67 reads, “Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man [Arabic *hanif*] who had surrendered (to Allah) [Arabic *Muslim*], and he was not of the idolaters.” The term *hanif* is of disputed significance among both Muslim and Western scholars. Of the former, some have connected its meaning to the performance of *hajj* rituals, while others associate it with the practice of male circumcision. The most common understanding of the term is as Tabari (d. 923) reports on the authority of al-Suddi, i.e., that “the *hanif* is he who is sincere in his faith in God alone.” Tabari himself concludes that it is all of the above encompassed in “following with uprightness the faith of Abraham and accepting him as imam.” See Ayoub, *The Qur‘an and Its Interpreters*, pp. 164 & 165.

⁴³ Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia, S. Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) p. 65.

Muhammad. Thus, in accordance with Islamic tradition, Shari‘ati refers to Muhammad as “the last prophet of monotheism who completed the prophecy of Ibrahim.”⁴⁴

Abraham’s rejection of idolatry involved a struggle against both his father, who, in Islamic tradition was a maker of idols, and his people, who worshipped them. The Qur’an narrates how Abraham, insisting on the unity of God, broke the idols, resulting in his being cast into a fire from which God delivered him.⁴⁵ According to some traditions, it was Nimrod, a certain pagan king who had united the earth into one kingdom, who challenged Abraham’s belief in God and who cast him into the fire.⁴⁶ The *Kitāb al-Mubtada’*, translated by Newby, narrates a conversation between the two men.

It was told us, and God knows best, that Nimrod said to Abraham, What is this God of yours whom you worship, invite to His worship, and tell of His might, which you assert is greater than anything else. Abraham said, My Lord who gives life and death. Nimrod said, But I give life and death. And Abraham said, How do you give life and death? He said, I take two men worthy of killing in my judgment,

⁴⁴ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 120.

⁴⁵ See Qur’an, Sura 21:51-70 which can be summarized as follows. After openly condemning the idolatry of his father and his people and testifying to God the Creator, Abraham then secretly destroyed all of the idols save their chief, placing the ax in its hand. Upon finding their idols thus, the people accused Abraham of mischief. Abraham accused the chief idol and suggested that they question him. The people then realized that it was they who were in the wrong but, rather than follow Abraham, decided to cast him into a fire which became “coolness and peace for Abraham.” The passage concludes, saying, “And they wished to set a snare for him, but We made them the greater losers.”

⁴⁶ Though not mentioned by name in the Qur’an, Nimrod is alluded to in Sura 2:258-60 and 21:68. See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, pp. 67-71. Totally absent from the biblical account, Nimrod also appears to be quite familiar to Jewish haggadic literature. See, for example, Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews Vol. 1: Bible Times and Characters from the Creation to Jacob* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913) pp. 186ff. Nimrod is here described as an “impious king” and “a cunning astrologer” who set himself up as God, requiring the worship of his subjects. For refusing to worship him, Abraham’s troubles were multiplied.

and I kill one of them, and I have given death to him. I forgive the other and release him, and I have given him life.⁴⁷

In its literal meaning, idolatry refers to the worship of statues and monuments which can neither benefit nor harm their worshippers.⁴⁸ By this definition, idolatry functions only on a historical and local level. More importantly, it has meaning solely on the level of religious worship, in the narrowest sense. However, Shari‘ati does not see opposition to this form of idolatry as something for which to fight. If this was all that Abraham stood for, he says, his mission would be of no practical value and would therefore be inconsequential to people today.⁴⁹ According to Shari‘ati, Abraham’s struggle, symbolized by the ax in his hand, was against every form of idolatry, including ignorance and oppression. For the sake of *this* struggle, he suffered the tortures of Nimrod and was thrown into the fire.

Therefore, while the traditions emphasize Abraham’s rebellion against idolatry on the level of religious worship, Shari‘ati lifts the discussion to the socio-political level by his interpretation of *shirk* and *tawhid*. He understands these terms in a metaphorical as well as literal sense. For Shari‘ati, all contradiction is incompatible with *tawhid*, whether it be “between man and nature, spirit and body, this world and the hereafter, [or] matter and meaning.”⁵⁰ These, as well as all “legal, class, social, political, racial, national, territorial, genetic or even economic contradictions”⁵¹ belong

⁴⁷ Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 70.

⁴⁸ See the Qur'an, Sura 21:66.

⁴⁹ See Shari‘ati, *Mi‘ād ba Ibrāhim* Vol. 29 Tehran: Intesharat-e Muna, 1977) pp. 19-20.

⁵⁰ Shari‘ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

to the world of *shirk*, a term loosely translated polytheism, but which, for Shari‘ati, includes dualism and trinitarianism.⁵² Not merely a religious doctrine, *shirk* provides the foundation for a corresponding social structure. Like *tawhid*, it is a religiously based social system; unlike *tawhid*, it is one that creates, perpetuates and justifies class, race and other social divisions. Completely at odds with *tawhid*, “[i]ts purpose is to corrupt man’s self-consciousness.”⁵³ *Shirk* and *tawhid* are thus understood by Shari‘ati as systems, systems which have been in conflict with each other throughout history.

The image of Abraham fashioned by Shari‘ati conforms to this socio-political interpretation of *tawhid* and *shirk* in several ways. Where traditional accounts, such as the *Kitāb al-Mubtada‘*, emphasize the religious context of Abraham’s rejection of idolatry, Shari‘ati sets the scene of what he refers to as Abraham’s *rebellion* in the context of the political and ‘scientific’ civilization of Abraham’s time. Though ignorant and corrupt as far as the knowledge of God is concerned, it is very highly advanced in the intellectual and legal fields. Having its origins 5,000 [sic] years before Christ, Shari‘ati says, Abraham’s civilization had reached the highest peak of scientific and social development before the Aryans even entered Iran or India, that is, before these great ancient civilizations had even begun. For Shari‘ati, one of the principal signs of a civilization’s development is the level of discrimination and social and class divisions present in it. The civilization of *Bayn al-Nahrayn* (Mesopotamia) had

⁵² Shari‘ati’s vision of *tawhid* does not allow that Christianity be considered a monotheistic religion. According to his classification, the Christian Trinity follows the three-fold Satanic pattern of idolatry. See Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, pp. 99-100, 124-27.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

reached the stage of class privilege and class oppression.⁵⁴ Yet, he says, it is a society full of idolatry. Every city, nation, family and individual has its own idol, its own god. This being the case, the people of society are divided into workers, masters, bourgeoisie, proletariat, slaves, masters, hungry, overfed, privileged and exploited according to which god they call their own.⁵⁵

Some have seen in this language of social dialectic a disposition in Shari'ati toward Marxist philosophy. While all scholars would agree that he was influenced by Marxist social thought, his own writings betray an ambivalence towards Marxism, leading various interpreters to conflicting conclusions regarding Shari'ati's position. Some "have concluded that he was a rabid anti-Marxist. Others, meanwhile, have argued that he was a secret Marxist who hid his true beliefs under the veil of Islam... Yet others...have dismissed him as a confused and confusing third-rate intellectual."⁵⁶ Ervand Abrahamian reconciles these conflicting opinions by examining an inconspicuous reference to Marx in Shari'ati's lectures on Islamology. According to Abrahamian, Shari'ati understood Marx to have passed through three main stages in his intellectual development. The first stage, that of an atheistic world-view which understood the world solely in terms of economics and saw all religious expression as an opiate, was rejected by Shari'ati. The second stage, in which Marx was "a

⁵⁴ Shari'ati's language here, i.e., "scientific," "social and class divisions," "class privilege and class oppression," bespeaks his strong tendency toward Marxist social analysis, making his discourse as much ideological as religious.

⁵⁵ See Shari'ati, *Mī 'ad bā Ibrāhīm*, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁶ Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mohahedin*, p. 114.

sophisticated sociologist investigating how rulers oppressed the ruled”⁵⁷ and how social and political praxis worked themselves out, was the one favoured by Shari‘ati. Shari‘ati also rejected the third stage of Marx, in which his valuable social science methodology was understood to have been corrupted because of political expediency.

Along the lines of Marx’s social science methodology, Shari‘ati constructed a fascinating analysis of the Cain and Abel narrative as symbolic of the historical struggle between two opposing forces. On the one hand is the Cainian system of political, economic and religious oppression and on the other is the Abelian system of “man’s unity, equality, and brotherhood.”⁵⁸ While both systems are religious in that they justify themselves on the basis of religion, the Cainian system of *shirk* is idolatrous because it uses religion as a tool of oppression while the Abelian *tawhid* system is liberated by religion to fulfill its God-given purpose. That Abel died by the hand of Cain does not, however, mean that the struggle is thereby over. If it were, the mission of Abraham and those who continue in his movement would be in vain. Rather, by his rebellion against the prevailing idolatrous socio-religious system of his day, Abraham revives and sets again in motion, the original Abelian order.⁵⁹

According to Shari‘ati, the idolatry of Abraham’s day also found expression in various forms of political oppression, most notably, in rulers’ claims to the divine right

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Shari‘ati, *Man and Islam*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ Here, Shari‘ati can be understood to be diverging from the traditional association of Abraham with the revival of Adam’s monotheism, using Abel as the prototype of monotheism instead. This, it can be argued, is because it is Abel’s and not Adam’s *tawhid* that suffered loss at the hands of an oppressor.

of mastery over the lives of their people. For Nimrod or Pharaoh to say, "I am your lord," Shari'ati says, does not mean that they are literally claiming to be God. However, interpreted as 'master of your destiny', lord does imply divine power. Paraphrasing the script traditionally attributed to Nimrod and quoted above, he suggests an interpretation that resonates with the contemporary context:

I am your master; your destiny and food and work and life and death are in my hand; if I want to, I can immediately give the order to kill you or if I want to, let you live. Whenever the executioner comes to kill and says, 'a dead person' or 'condemned to death,' I can forgive and grant you new life! That is, your life and destiny are in my hand.⁶⁰

Statements such as these, Shari'ati contends, constitute a claim to divinity as they assign ownership of man to man. Properly named, such lordship of man over man is idolatry. Again, it is against this form of idolatry, that is, what we may refer to as politico-religious idolatry, that Abraham rises "alone."⁶¹

As such, idolatry functions as a metaphor for the use of a religious, but not a *tawhidī* world-view to justify any oppressive and discriminatory socio-political system. It is couched in religious language⁶² because, from the point of view of oppressors, it is

⁶⁰ Shari'ati, *Mī'ād bā Ibrāhīm*, p. 29 (my translation, as are all quotations from *Mī'ād bā Ibrāhīm*).

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 36. Elsewhere, Shari'ati insists that to arise alone is of no value; it must be a people-movement.

⁶² Couching a particular social or political ideology in religious language because it is the only one that will move the masses is not unique to established or traditional religion. Hamid Dabashi is not alone in suggesting that Shari'ati's chief interest in religion was its political usefulness. See Dabashi, "Ali Shari'ati's Islam," pp. 210-218 where the author argues against the common thesis that Shari'ati was attempting to provide an authentically Islamic solution to Iranian society. His thesis is that what Shari'ati created, what Keddie calls an "Islamic humanism," was not built upon the foundation of traditional Islam, but was, rather, "a peculiar invention that can have no bearing on Islamic tradition." p. 218. See also, pp. 214-15.

religion that best convinces people of the 'sanctity' and 'naturalness' of such a system, while at the same time keeps them ignorant of "the great deception."⁶³ Because religion, as traditionally understood, says that God created the poor to be poor and the rich to be rich, and God created the one to serve the other, social conditions cannot, yea, must not be changed by people. Making allusion to his symbolic 'Satanic trinity of evil,' Shari'ati explains,

As masses are forced into submission by money and exploitation they are simultaneously drugged with religion. Specifically, one grabs the masses' head, the second robs its pocket, and the third whispers in their ears, 'Don't worry brother! Be quiet, God will take care of it tomorrow!'⁶⁴

This, Shari'ati emphatically affirms, is the great deception against which Abraham rebelled.

That Abraham rebelled against this apparently sacrosanct situation has profound meaning for Shari'ati's understanding of man, which, he believes, is composed of two dimensions, the one mud-like and the other spirit. The former relates to what is base; the latter, to what is sacred and lofty. The two remain in conflict with each other; which one predominates in man is up to him to choose. "It is up to man to choose where to go, towards mud or providence. And as long as he has not selected either of the poles as his fate, struggle will perpetually rage within him."⁶⁵ In order for these two dimensions to be in harmony or to find balance, man must adhere to a

⁶³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁶⁴ Shari'ati, *Man and Islam*, p. 20.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

corresponding, that is, a two-dimensional religion. Islam, Shari‘ati maintains, with its equilibrium between politics, warfare and social concern on the one hand and worship and prayer on the other, is such a religion. It can thus provide a way out of the ‘drugged’ state of passivity to social and political injustice in the name of religion.

Another way in which Shari‘ati represents this dichotomy in man is by a definition of the two words used to denote man in the Qur‘an, *bashar*⁶⁶ and *insān*⁶⁷. The former refers to man as a biological being and the latter to man in his intellectual, social and spiritual development. *Bashar* is the common property of all men, but *insān* is something man attains through *jihād* (struggle). Yet another formulation of it is that “Bashar is a ‘being’ while Ensan is a ‘becoming.’ And the difference,” Shari‘ati says, “between Ensan, Bashar, and all the other natural phenomena such as animals, trees, etc. is that all are ‘beings’ except Ensan who is a ‘becoming.’”⁶⁸ In this distinction between *bashar* and *insān*, Shari‘ati wants to emphasize that whenever man displays apathy with regard to social and political conditions it is because he is imprisoned by the attributes of *bashar*. That is, his will is held in bondage to what religion refers to as fate and what social science refers to as historical determinism. Whether called by one name or the other, they are really the same thing, he affirms.⁶⁹

In clarifying his point, Shari‘ati makes reference to the example of the religiously motivated opposition that arose against the Umayyids in the ninth century,

⁶⁶ Sura 18:110.

⁶⁷ Sura 17:11.

⁶⁸ Shari‘ati, *Man and Islam*, p. 47.

⁶⁹ See Shari‘ati, *Mi‘ād bā Ibrāhīm*, p. 37.

though it is understood that he intends his listeners to hear not Umayyids but Pahlavi regime. He accuses the modern day intelligentsia⁷⁰ of Iran of complicity in promoting fatalism by downplaying the role of the opposition. “They stood against them uselessly, their [the Abbasids] coming into being was the result of historical determinism,” Shari‘ati freely quotes them as saying. He then concludes, “These are our ‘modern predestinarians.’ This one in the name of dialectics, and that one in the name of God.”⁷¹

The attributes of *insān*, on the other hand, are self-consciousness, that is, the ability to perceive cosmic and worldly reality, free will, including the ability to revolt even against oneself, which Shari‘ati considers to be “the most sublime aspect of Ensaniat,”⁷² and the power to create beyond what is necessary for mere survival. It is as *insān*, and not merely as *bashar*, that man has been entrusted by God with the responsibility of *khalāfat* (vicegerency), that is, to represent God by performing God’s will on earth. However, because man’s power to choose is imprisoned in various “determinisms,” man needs to free himself from all ideologies that restrict his power to will and to act.

⁷⁰ Shari‘ati uses the Persian word *rawshānəfrān* here which Abrahamian elsewhere denotes by the word “intelligentsia.” He criticizes those who translate it as “free-thinkers,” suggesting that they are attempting to downplay Shari‘ati’s clear preference for rule by an intellectual elite. See Abrahamian, p. 113-14. Bayat-Philipp, on the other hand, believes that what Shari‘ati intends by the term is “‘a man endowed with an enlightened mind,’” whether formally educated or not, as opposed to “a professional thinker.” See Bayat-Philipp, “Shi‘ism in Contemporary Iranian Politics,” p. 158.

⁷¹ Shari‘ati, *Mi‘ad bā Ibrāhīm*, p. 37.

⁷² Shari‘ati, *Man and Islam*, p. 50.

It is interesting to note that, much like Shari'ati's distinction between two types of human beings, only one of which is eligible for vicegerency, Sufis such as Nisaburi (d.1327) claim that man is God's vicegerent only when "the light of the innermost faculty in the glass of the heart" is illumined. "Thus, when man's lamp is so illumined with the fire of the light of God, he becomes God's vicegerent in His earth..."⁷³ Kenneth Cragg notes Shari'ati's contempt for Sufism because, as Cragg says, "it wrapped its devotees in a cocoon of apathetic piety quite incapable of vigorous action or even of recognizing social ills."⁷⁴ It is tempting to see in Shari'ati's interpretation of *bashar* and *insān* an attempt to employ a Sufi concept to develop a social activist model, that is, to convert the mystical notion of inner transformation into a socially functional revolutionary ideology, to transform mysticism from social passivity to social responsibility.⁷⁵

According to this system of thought, Abraham would be a worthy vicegerent. He is conscious, both of himself and his society, he perceives reality on the cosmic and

⁷³ Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, p. 78.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Cragg, "Ali Shariati of Tehran," *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'an* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985) p. 76. Steven Benson, in his article, "Islam and Social Change in the Writings of 'Ali Shari'ati: His *Hajj* as a Mystical Handbook for Revolutionaries," *The Muslim World* 81 No. 1 (1991), notes that while Shari'ati did indeed regard the insularizing tendencies of mysticism negatively, he also "viewed mysticism as being 'innate to human nature'" and "ranked it with equality and freedom as one of three powerful drives in human nature that had both positive and negative effects, and each needed to be balanced by the other two in order for any of them to reach its highest potential." p. 17.

⁷⁵ Moreover, Benson's comments may be understood to mean that in Shari'ati's system of religious thought, as a property of the Cainian system or Safavid Islam, a distorted Sufism (mysticism) numbs its adherents into a social passivism which is not a part of the Abelian system or Alid Islam. At the same time, a mysticism that is employed in the service of Alid Islam provides the inner force necessary for socio-religious rebellion. See Benson, "Islam and Social Change," p. 17.

worldly levels and his will motivates him to revolt against political, social, economic and historical determinism. The story of Abraham, Shari‘ati contends, shows us that the responsibility to be God’s vicegerent on earth regardless of the strength of the opposition, has never been revoked. Although Abraham encountered severe oppression and the torture of fire as a result of his rebellion, he did not abandon his duty. Shari‘ati sees suffering, a familiar theme in Shi‘ism,⁷⁶ as inevitable to those who follow Abraham. “The same fire is ignited in the fate and future of every responsible individual who is indebted to enlightenment and guidance.”⁷⁷ It is for these reasons that Abraham’s struggle against idolatry is understood by Shari‘ati as “a movement the aim of which is to liberate mankind.”⁷⁸

That Abraham’s rejection of idolatry is intensely practical in nature and likewise relevant to modern Iranian society fits well within Shari‘ati’s whole approach to religion and religious truth. That which tests the value of a religious doctrine or concept is not whether or not it stands up to scientific or historical inquiry, but whether or not it effects positive change in society. “If we are Muslims,” Shari‘ati is quoted as saying,

⁷⁶ The readiness to suffer for the sake of what is right and just, although attributed also to the prophet, and even more significantly to the first Imam, ‘Ali, originates as a doctrine of suffering in the event of Karbala. It was there, in the year 680, that the fourth Imam and grandson of the prophet through ‘Ali and Fatima, Husayn, suffered a martyrdom that has become, for the Shi‘i, the paradigm of martyrdom. For a careful analysis of the significance of Karbala in popular piety, see Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: The Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi‘ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978). See also Yann Richard, *Shi‘ite Islam: Polity, Ideology, and Creed*, translated by Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) pp. 27-34.

⁷⁷ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 36.

⁷⁸ Shari‘ati, *Mi‘ad ba Ibrahim*, p. 19.

if we are Shi'is, and believe in the Islamic and Shi'i precepts, and yet those precepts have had no positive results upon our lives, it is obvious that we have to doubt our understanding of them. For we all believe that it is not possible for a nation to be Muslim, to believe in Ali and his way, and yet to gain no benefit from such a belief.⁷⁹

"It is in action that truth manifests itself," he is again quoted as affirming.⁸⁰ Every aspect of traditional Islam, including prayer, must be of practical value in the socio-political context, or it is merely outdated superstition.⁸¹ Shari'ati further emphasizes the necessity of religion to be of practical social value in his discussion of a prominent command of Islam, that of promoting what is good and forbidding what is evil.⁸² It is a command to social responsibility, Shari'ati notes, not a subject of intellectual inquiry; as such, it requires action, not contemplation.

Dabashi maintains that Shari'ati believed his approach to religion to be consciously and vehemently anti-traditional.⁸³ He further contends that Shari'ati's motivation in detaching his system from traditional Islam was in order to present his ideas as revolutionary ideology, rather than as religion proper, and that, in order to inspire the modern young intelligentsia with revolutionary fervour. Traditional Islam, in Dabashi's interpretation, was too individualistic for Shari'ati's purposes. According to Dabashi, Shari'ati's politicized Islam was a "collective 'salvation' through collective

⁷⁹ Shari'ati, *Intizar, Mazhab-i i'tiraz*, (Tehran, 1971). Quoted and translated by Mangol Bayat-Philipp, "Shi'ism in Contemporary Iranian Politics: The Case of Ali Shari'ati," p. 156.

⁸⁰ Shari'ati, *Shi'a* (no further details given), quoted by Dabashi, "Ali Shari'ati's Islam," p. 209.

⁸¹ Nikki Keddie hearkens back to Shari'ati's influence in noting that during the Revolution, community prayer was given the significance of insurrection. See Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 220.

⁸² See Qur'an, Sura 9:71 where Muslims ("believers") are defined by their adherence to this practice along with other fundamental practices of *taqwa* (piety).

⁸³ Dabashi, "Ali Shari'ati's Islam," p. 208.

political expression.”⁸⁴ He approached Islam, then, as a total system encompassing man’s life in its entirety, politically, socially and religiously. He therefore infused familiar religious symbols and language with new and revolutionary meaning.

The Second Stage: the Building of the *Ka’ba* and the *Hajj*

*And [remember] when We made the House (at Mecca) a resort for mankind and a sanctuary, (saying): Take as your place of worship the place where Abraham stood (to pray). And We imposed a duty upon Abraham and Ishmael, (saying): Purify My house for those who go around and those who meditate therein and those who bow down and prostrate themselves (in worship)...And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House, (Abraham prayed): Our Lord! Accept from us (this duty). Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Hearer, the Knower.*⁸⁵

Although the Qur'an clearly links Abraham and Ishmael with the raising of the foundations of the *ka’ba*, “the centre of Muslim piety,”⁸⁶ in Mecca, it says nothing about its origins. Some commentators affirm that the foundations were first laid by Adam but that the House was completely destroyed (or taken up to heaven during the great flood) until God commanded Abraham to rebuild it,⁸⁷ a report the theological

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 209.

⁸⁵ Sura 2:125 & 127. See also Sura 22:26-29.

⁸⁶ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1995) p. 152. Raphael Patai remarks that while all other Islamic traditions about Abraham can be found in some form in the Bible or Midrash, Abraham’s link with the *ka’ba* and his prayer in Sura 2:129 that God raise up a messenger from among the Arabs is unique to Islam, thereby establishing Islam in the eyes of Muslims as the pure Abrahamic religion. See Raphael Patai, *The Seed of Abraham: Jews and Arabs in Contact and Conflict* (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1986) pp. 20-21.

⁸⁷ Of this opinion are Tabari, Zamakhshari and Ibn Arabi, though they differ as to the details and theological significance of the House. See Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, pp. 158-60. The *Kitāb al-Mubtada’*, referred to above, also affirms that the foundations of the *ka’ba* were first built by Adam. See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 75.

significance of which may be interpreted as symbolic of the Islamic notion of Abraham's, and later on, Muhammad's renewal of *al-dīn al-fīlī ri*⁸⁸ The *ka'ba* is said to have become the focus of pagan cult worship in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁸⁹ After the *hijra*, or emigration of the prophet to Medina in AD 622, the direction of prayer for Muslims was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca and the *ka'ba*,⁹⁰ an event that the classical Qur'an commentator Wahidi (d. 1076) attributes to Muhammad's preference for the *ka'ba* "because it was the *qibla* of Abraham."⁹¹ Upon his triumphant return to Mecca in AD 630, Muhammad cleansed the *ka'ba* of the 360 idols worshipped there, recalling Abraham's destruction of the idols of his people.

Likewise, an Abrahamic origin is ascribed to the annual Muslim pilgrimage, or *hājj*, to Mecca.⁹² According to tradition, Gabriel showed all the rites to Abraham, instructing him at each of the ritual stations.⁹³ As most of the details of the *hājj* are not

⁸⁸ *al-dīn al-fīlī ri* or natural religion, is defined as pure monotheism and attributed to man in his natural state. That Islam claims for itself this appellation, tracing its origins to Adam, signifies its declaration to be the original and pure monotheism of man in Paradise. A direct connection is thus established between Adam, Abraham and Muhammad, the latter two of whom renewed that which was lost of the first.

⁸⁹ See A.J. Wensinck & J. Jomier, "Ka'ba," *EJ*² Vol. IV (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971) p. 318.

⁹⁰ See Sura 2:144-50.

⁹¹ Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, p. 173. The impression may be given here that Wahidi is saying that Muhammad took it upon himself to change the *qibla*. It should be noted that although, as Wahidi speculates, it was his preference, Wahidi notes that Muhammad did not make the change until Sura 2:144, authorizing him to do so, was sent to him 'from heaven.'

⁹² See Sura 2:196-203 and 22:26-29. While Islamic scholars are uncertain as to when the *hājj* was formally instituted in Islam, Ayoub notes that Sayyid Qutb traces its injunction to the latter set of verses which describe the rite as ordained for Abraham "whose faith was the original Islam to which Muhammad came to call the Arabs as well as the rest of humankind." However, in accordance with Sayyid Qutb's understanding, Ayoub notes that "the pilgrimage was not organized as an Islamic communal activity until the Prophet himself led the community to the Kaaba shortly before his death..." Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, p. 205.

⁹³ The traditional rites of the *hājj* are briefly described as follows: Prior to arrival in Mecca, at *Miqāt*, the pilgrim enters a state of ritual purity, *ihram*, (lit. "making unlawful" or "prohibition"). It is accompanied by the wearing of ritual white garments in place of the pilgrim's own clothing and uttering the *! albiyya*

recorded in the Qur'an, these have been filled in by commentators. The stone upon which Abraham is believed to have stood and which bears his footprints is called *maqām-i Ibrāhīm* (Abraham's station or position).⁹⁴ It is one of the rites of *hajj* to pray at or towards this stone. In Shari'ati's symbolic interpretation of the *hajj*, the pilgrim follows in Abraham's footsteps, taking on his spiritual posture and standing, figuratively and literally, in *maqām-i Ibrāhīm*. Although the *hajj* is enacted in imitation of Abraham, the relationship between the pilgrim and Abraham is, in Shari'ati's mind, much closer than imitation because the former, through playing the

("invocation")—*Labaika, Allāhuma, labaika* ("at Your service, O Lord; at Your service"). The former has come to symbolize, in addition to purity and preparation for death when summoned by God, the unity of Muslim brotherhood. Upon arrival in Mecca, the pilgrim circumambulates the *ka'ba* seven times, called *lā'awāf* followed by praying towards the *maqām-i Ibrāhīm* and the *ka'ba*, and running, *sā'y*, seven times between *al-Sāfā* and *al-Marwā* in commemoration of Hajar's frantic search for water for her young son, Ishmael. Until this point performing the rituals individually, the pilgrimage then continues in groups led by guides. A sermon, *khuū' bā* is heard preached from the mosque in Mecca, reminding the pilgrims of their duties. The next two nights are spent at *Mīnā* and *'Arafāt*. Prayers are recited at *'Arafāt* and a sermon is again preached. After sunset of the ninth day of *hajj*, the pilgrims depart *'Arafāt* and proceed to *Muzdalifa* where prayers are again recited. The route then takes the pilgrims back to *Mīnā* where they will spend three days throwing stones at a construction made up of three parts, said to symbolize the devil, and performing sacrifices in memory of Abraham's (aborted) sacrifice of his son. The pilgrims then return to Mecca and perform a further *lā'awāf* around the *ka'ba*. Ritual shaving or cutting of the hair and leaving the state of *ihram* marks the end of the formal *hajj*. For further details, see B. Lewis, "Hadjdj," *EI²* Vol. 3, pp.31-38, and Fredrick Matthewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1994) pp. 130-36.

⁹⁴ It is referred to as a 'sign' in Suras 2:125 and 3:97. The transliteration used here is in accordance with Persian pronunciation, not the Arabic which would omit the *-i*. What Abraham was doing when he stood on this stone is ambiguous in the commentators. The Qur'an translation quoted above assumes that it was his place of prayer. However, most commentators agree that it was where he stood while building the *ka'ba*, though it has also been inferred that it is the place from which he announced the pilgrimage to mankind, or that it was the place where he stood when Ishmael's second wife washed his head. See Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of N.Y. Press, 1990) p. 97 (and p. 220 n.26). The imprint of his feet is, as the Qur'an also states, generally interpreted as a sign, some say, of Abraham's prophethood. See Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) pp. 6-9, 16-17 and Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, pp. 157-58.

role of Abraham, actually becomes Abraham. The person who embarks on the *hajj*, like Abraham, sets out on a “migration to eternity toward the [sic] Almighty Allah.”⁹⁵

After leaving the *ka'ba*, each of the stops along the way (of the greater *hajj*), represents, for Shari'ati, a spiritual stage of man's evolution from his created state as “Adam,” where he acquires knowledge and science, through the stage of consciousness and understanding, to the final stage of love and faith.⁹⁶ It is understood, likewise, as a journey from death to life. Death, for Shari'ati, is symbolic of man's imprisonment in his mud-like nature. Life represents consciousness, choice and fulfillment of the responsibility to be God's vicegerent on earth. A pilgrimage from *bashar* to *insān*, it is never ending; the pilgrim is always moving, always going from one stage to the next until he reaches eternity, the actual destination.

Shari'ati emphasizes the unifying significance of the ritual garments of *ihrām* and the prayer of commitment to worship none but God as symbolic of the fact that “[o]n his way to Allah, man is not just ‘to be’ but he is ‘to become’ what he should be!”⁹⁷ Clothed in “the white dress of the hereafter,” every pilgrim prays “a promise to Allah that there will be no prostration nor bowing to anyone other than Him!”⁹⁸ Furthermore, regular clothing, Shari'ati reflects, denotes individualism rather than collectivism and separation between people that results in various types of discrimination, social, political and religious. All of these are artificial distinctions

⁹⁵ Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 1.

⁹⁶ See *Ibid.*, pp. 50-80.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

perpetrated by the descendants of Cain, hiding the original “man,” “Adam,” that one was and that one will be in death. *Ihram* thus symbolizes the melting of individuals into one, mankind. “All the I’s have died in *Miqat*; what has evolved is a ‘We’.”⁹⁹ It is a ‘we’ of equality, demonstrating the conversion of society from *shirk* to *tawhid*, “a human show of Allah’s unity.”¹⁰⁰

Like Abraham, whom, Shari‘ati says, is present at *Miqat*, the pilgrim becomes simply a person, with no distinguishing qualification but submission and obedience to God alone, a *hanif*. While the term *hanif* has reference to the absence of religious sectarianism, in the context of Shari‘ati’s thought, the fact that Abraham belonged to no specific religious community suggests his interpretation of Abraham as symbolic of those assembled for *hajj*, that is, a people with no socio-political demarcations. Moreover, by taking on this group identity, one is simultaneously rejecting one’s individuality and becoming a people or nation, an *umma*. The *umma*, Shari‘ati explains, is “a society in which a number of individuals, possessing a common faith and goal, come together in harmony with the intention of advancing and moving

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

toward their common goal.”¹⁰¹ This, Shari‘ati observes, is all a part of becoming Abraham who is described in the Qur‘an as “a nation obedient to Allah.”¹⁰²

Shari‘ati understands the notion of *umma*, or *al-nās* (the people, the masses), as having profound sociological significance. Unlike other ideologies that believe social change is the result either of great and powerful personalities, chance, or historical determinism, Islam, he asserts emphatically, is the only system in which social change happens from the bottom up. Whereas others address themselves to the educated elite, to a specific race, or to a certain class or social group, the prophet addresses his message to the masses who are responsible to put it into practice. Shari‘ati concludes from this that

Islam is the first school of social thought that recognizes the masses as the basis, the fundamental and conscious factor in determining history and society - not the elect as Nietzsche thought, not the aristocracy and nobility as Plato claimed, not great personalities as Carlyle and Emerson believed, not those of pure blood as Alexis Carrel imagined, not the priests or the intellectuals, but the masses.¹⁰³

It is the Muslim community, not a mere collection of individuals but a society “possessed of an identity totally independent from all of its individual members,”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Shari‘ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 119. Shari‘ati’s strict and clearly Islamic vision of *tawhid* is here not insignificant with regards to the type of society such an image would generate if patterned along the lines of the *hajj*. It is oneness at the expense of the individual, the defining factor of identity being found in the absence of distinction or difference of any kind and in the presence of a common faith and ideology. As in a purely socialist society, plurality is allowed for only in terms of numerical value, not in terms of personhood or personal identity (even as capitalism privileges the inverse, that is, individuality at the expense of community).

¹⁰² Sura 16:120, quoted by Shari‘ati in *Hajj*, p. 11.

¹⁰³ Shari‘ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

that is the representative of God on earth and from among whom the *rawshanfekr* arises. An individual alone, Shari‘ati says, “can do nothing.”¹⁰⁵

Another word Shari‘ati uses to describe the *umma* is army, an army of *tawhīd*, of which Abraham is the commander. In this army, rank is determined solely “on the basis of one’s relation to Allah and not one another.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, the oneness of the people is a symbolic demonstration of the oneness (*tawhīd*) of God. Shari‘ati’s interpretation of *tawhīd* is in direct correspondence to his understanding of idolatry. As the truly substantial definition of idolatry and *shirk* is in their political and social significance, so *tawhīd* refers not merely to the fact that “God is one, not two,”¹⁰⁷ but to the power of socio-political liberation that confession of *tawhīd* holds. When the prophet of Islam proclaimed that God is One, Shari‘ati contends, Bilal found liberation from slavery. A merely philosophical understanding of *tawhīd* would not have such an effect. Consequently, as the religious lie of idolatry is the cause of man’s social and political oppression, so the truth of *tawhīd* is the cause of his liberation. *Tawhīd* therefore, signifies at once the unity of God and the oneness of the society over which this God is supreme. Through his opposition to idolatry and establishment of *tawhīd* in the context of the rituals of *hajj*, Abraham functions as a liberator, struggling to establish a unified society and to abolish all social, political, economic, racial and class contradictions and divisions. The seriousness of Shari‘ati’s interpretation of Abraham

¹⁰⁵ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁰⁷ Shari‘ati, *Mi‘ad ba‘ Ibrahim*, p. 21.

and *hājj* is here stressed by Benson who notes that the Shah, recognizing its revolutionary potential, tried to prevent people from going on *hājj*.¹⁰⁸

Coming now to the *ka'ba*, the central focus of the *hājj*, we see that it is at once called “the House of God” as well as “the house of the people” and “the free house,”¹⁰⁹ demonstrating that the terms are interchangeable. Therefore, when it is said that rule or property belongs to God, to Shari‘ati, it means that it belongs, not to a special class of people who claim to represent God, the *‘ulama‘*, but to *al-nās*, which Shari‘ati interprets to mean “society,” rather than people as individuals. That it is society as a whole to whom is given the responsibility of vicegerency appears incongruous with his previous assertion that vicegerency belongs only to certain people, namely, those who have reached the state of *ensāniyat* (full humanity, as defined above by Shari‘ati).

Drawing upon the notion of the *ka'ba* and its sacred precincts as a place of refuge,¹¹⁰ Shari‘ati says that it is symbolic of Abraham’s struggle for freedom for the (oppressed) people because Abraham built it as ““the first house of the people”¹¹¹ in

¹⁰⁸ See Benson, “Islam and Social Change,” p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ Shari‘ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, p. 117. Shari‘ati is here translating *bayt al-‘atīq*, meaning “ancient house” of Sura 22:29 & 33 as “house of freedom.”

¹¹⁰ The precincts of the *ka'ba* were, even in pre-Islamic Arabia, considered *haram*, that is, a “sacred zone” or “sanctuary” within which prohibitions were laid upon all who entered. (The word is from the same root that means “forbidden.”) Within the *haram*, it was forbidden to carry arms, to shed blood or to sustain tribal feuds. It was a meeting place for peaceful settlement of all sorts of disputes. Additionally, much like the Jewish “cities of refuge”, anyone who unintentionally killed someone could flee to the *haram* for safety. Peters notes that the *ka'ba* was a temple with “all the primary characteristics of such:...[including] a characteristic *haram* with the usual privileges of the right of asylum, and so on.” Peters, *The Hajj*, pp. 13-14. Sura 3:97 states, ...and whosoever entereth [the Sanctuary] is safe...

¹¹¹ Qur'an, Sura 3:96 *Lo! the first Sanctuary appointed for mankind was that at Becca, a blessed place, a guidance to the peoples;* “Becca” is understood as another name for Mecca.

history, 'the free house' of freedom and the Kaaba of love and worship."¹¹² It is a house that offers sanctuary for those oppressed by evil leaders, such as Nimrod.

Shari'ati comments,

It is a shelter for those who are homeless, a shelter for those who have been forced to leave, a shelter for those who are wounded on this earth and a shelter for those who are fleeing. This house is to be a torch amidst a long and dark night. It symbolizes a rebel in the dark of his oppression! Everyone is shameful and insecure; the earth has been converted into a big house for prostitutes where there is respect for nobody. It is a big slaughter house where nothing but oppression and discrimination prevails. At last -- there is a house which is clean, safe and secure for all mankind (Allah's family) - the Kaaba!¹¹³

The *ka'ba* is thus representative of Abraham's dedication to saving the people of his time, awakening them from the slumber of their ignorance and leading them forward in the fight against oppression.

Circumambulation (*tawaf*) around the *ka'ba* is performed in complete unison. It is a collective action in which all individual identities based on race, gender, nationality or name are absorbed by the group. The people become one, an *umma* on their way towards Allah. *Tawaf* itself is compulsory in Islam.¹¹⁴ For Shari'ati, this demonstrates the social consciousness and collectivism required of Muslims.

You must be drawn into the roaring river of people who are circumambulating. This is how you will become a Hajj [person who has completed the *hajj*.]...Outside the Kaaba each person has his own

¹¹² Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 37.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ This point is emphasized by Fr. Buhl in his article, "tawaf," *EI*, Vol. IV:2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1934) p.703, who notes that when the pilgrimage to Mecca was made difficult by the anti-caliph 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubair, the caliph 'Abd al-Malik decreed that "a tawaf around the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem would have the same value as that around the Ka'ba..." p. 703.

ways and rights. ‘Totality’ is only a theoretical concept...Therefore, it is ‘people’ representing ‘mankind’ who are making Tawaf!¹¹⁵

As a symbol of the rejection of self-centeredness and self-identity, and commitment to community, completion of the *tawaf* qualifies a person to then stand in Abraham’s position, metaphorically and literally, that is, to become, like Abraham, “the great rebel who opposed idolatry and established monotheism (*tawhid*) in this world.”¹¹⁶

Linked to Abraham, and of tremendous symbolic significance to Shari‘ati, is Abraham’s slave-girl, Hajar, who is remembered both in *tawaf* and the next part of *hajj, sa'y* (running).¹¹⁷ For Shari‘ati, Hajar is an oppressed person in *shirk* society—a lonely, female slave, exiled and “rejected from the capitalistic-aristocratic system, hated by the nations, hated by the classes and races, hated by the family—this black maid was all alone with her child in her arms!”¹¹⁸ Yet, she was a promoter of the cause

¹¹⁵ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 28.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

¹¹⁷ Though not mentioned in the Qur'an, legends surrounding Hajar's expulsion to Mecca with her young son Ishmael are numerous. The following is a summary of the story as told by Tabari: With God's permission, Abraham had relations with Hajar who gave birth to Ishmael. After Isaac was born, Sarah's jealousy overtook her and she demanded that Abraham send Hajar and Ishmael away. At God's command, Abraham took them in the direction of Mecca, stopping at all the towns along the way and inquiring of Gabriel, who accompanied them, if this was the place they were to settle and build the "House." When at last they reached Mecca and the site for the House was visible, Gabriel commanded them to remain. In the words of the Qur'an, Abraham then prayed, saying: *Our Lord: Lo! I have settled some of my posterity in an uncultivable valley near unto Thy holy House, our Lord! that they may establish proper worship; so incline some hearts of men that they may yearn toward them, and provide Thou them with fruits in order that they may be thankful* (Sura 14:37). Ishmael became thirsty and his mother heard a sound at *al-Safa* and went to look there but found nothing. The same happened at *al-Marwa*, until Hajar had run frantically between the two places several times. Finally, she found Ishmael digging in the ground with his fingers and from there a spring of water gushed forth. See Peters, *The Hajj*, pp. 4-5. Drinking from the waters of *Zamzam* is also a part of the *hajj*. Newby's sources add, as is commonly understood, that Hajar was eventually buried in the precincts of the *ka'ba*, thus being remembered during *tawaf*. See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 74. Variations on the story may be found in Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*.

¹¹⁸ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 40.

of Abraham because, although submissive and obedient to God, she did not sit still, doing nothing; rather, she sought water, a material substance to meet a genuine human need. If *tawāfi* represents the esoteric dimension of life—unity, truth, love, devotion, worship—for Shari‘ati, *sa‘y*¹¹⁹ represents the material dimension—rationalism, economy, will-power, mastery of this world. Through the rituals of *hajj*, he says, Abraham’s God teaches us that both are important. Neither quiet, passive submission, nor exerting effort to supply the material needs of oneself and others is sufficient by itself. Faith needs hands to work.

At *Mina*, Abraham’s rebellion is vividly symbolized in Shari‘ati’s thought by the last major part of *hajj* prior to the sacrifice, the stoning of “the three Satans.”¹²⁰ According to the system of *tawhīd*, they represent the three symbolic powers of Pharaoh, symbol of the political establishment, Croesus (Korah), symbol of the economic establishment, and Balam, symbol of the institutional religious establishment, all of which are opposed to *tawhīd*. Likewise, the first exercises political oppression through dictatorship, the second economic oppression through capitalism, and the third represents the hypocrisy of the learned, particularly of the clergy. They are “the three faces of Cain”¹²¹ which function as “the three major powers of oppression [*zur*], wealth [*zar*] and hypocrisy [*ta‘zvir*]...” Throughout history,

¹¹⁹ As noted earlier, from Arabic *sa‘y* translates as “running”. Shari‘ati, however, understands the word in its Persian meaning, that is, “effort, endeavor.”

¹²⁰ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 120. He draws a parallel here between the shooting of the three idols as the last action of *hajj* (though actually, the sacrifice is the last major action) and the last chapter of the Qur'an which issues a warning to take refuge in God (*tawhīd*) against the three powers of evil.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

they, “the children of Cain, have been the rulers of mankind.”¹²² Faces of the Cainian system, they are at once three faces of Satan who summons people to worship (submit to) him in place of God. Abraham issues the command to shoot these idols and thereby secure liberation for those enslaved by them.

Shari‘ati’s language here clearly shows his anti-establishment posture,¹²³ for it is a command to not remain passive in the face of political oppression. The tension between political quietism versus activism has exercised the minds of Shi‘i learned men ever since the founding of Shi‘ism upon the essentially political question of succession to the prophet. Being fundamentally a political movement at its inception, Nikki Keddie points out, the earliest period of Shi‘ism accentuated political activism. After that, Keddie states, two important Shi‘i concepts have been used at various times in history to support either an activist or quietist attitude, depending on the need of the time.

The messianic concept of the Mahdi, stronger in Shi‘ism than in Sunnism, has frequently been the inspiration for revolutionary movements. At other times, it has been “transformed into a justification for accepting the status quo.”¹²⁴ The other concept is the significance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. During the period of Safavid rule, passion plays and mourning processions involving self-flagellation in

¹²² Ibid., p. 101.

¹²³ Ironically, it became institutionalized by those clergy who adopted his ideas and made them the official religious ideology of the state.

¹²⁴ Nikki Keddie, “Shi‘ism and Revolution,” *Religion, Rebellion, Revolution: An interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collection of essays*, edited by Bruce Lincoln (London: The MacMillan Press, Ltd, 1985) p. 159.

commemoration of Husayn's death were promoted and popularized.¹²⁵ These processions emphasized the intercessory role of Husayn and downplayed the political significance of his struggle. As discussed briefly above, Shari'ati and other revolutionary minded individuals stressed the activist nature of Husayn as a "courageous hero leading a battle against odds in order to establish justice."¹²⁶ Likewise, in Shari'ati's understanding, Abraham, the founder of monotheism, is clearly on the side of political activism. To rebel against social and political injustice, therefore, is not a symptom of irreligion; on the contrary, it is to stand in Abraham's position.

The last of these idols, hypocrisy, is the one to be attacked first. When the hypocritical system of the religious establishment falls, wealth and oppression fall with it. Shari'ati associates hypocrisy with the Qur'anic figure of "Khannas," spoken of in sura 114:1-5:

Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, the King of mankind, the God of mankind, from the evil of the sneaking whisperer (*al-waswas al-khannas*), who whispereth in the hearts of mankind.

He identifies this person as "a spiritual leader who sells his faith to achieve wealth and a scientist who sells his knowledge or a treacherous intellectual!"¹²⁷ The actions of

¹²⁵ Shari'ati distinguishes sharply between "Safavid Shi'ism" which is also Pahlavi Shi'ism and which promotes political quietism and acceptance of the status quo and "Aliid Shi'ism" which he claims is true Shi'ism. The differences between the two are outlined in detail in his book devoted to the subject. In Persian, the book is entitled *Tashayyo-i 'alavi va tashayyo-i safavi* (n.p., n.d.); see pp. 320ff. Summaries or translations in English appear in Nikki Keddie, *Roots of the Islamic Revolution*, pp. 218-20 and Shahrough Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980) pp. 231-33.

¹²⁶ Keddie, "Shi'ism and Revolution," p. 161.

¹²⁷ Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 104.

these people are perceived as “the most destructive, disunifying, misleading and discriminating in the history of mankind who once lived as a peaceful and collective society.”¹²⁸ Islam, for Shari‘ati, is liberative when taken out of the exploitative hands of its official representatives, that is, the clergy or the idol of Balam and those who seek to profit by religion politically.

A similar passage found in sura 113, immediately following the acclaimed *Tawhid* sura which reads,

Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him,

again speaks of taking refuge in God from malevolent enemies. It reads,

Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak from the evil of that which He created; from the evil of the darkness when it is intense, and from the evil of malignant witchcraft, and from the evil of the envier when he envieth.

With some measure of creativity, Shari‘ati interprets this passage as anti-imperialistic. He says that the last entity “refers to the foreigners and foreign enemies who are strangers to you and your country. You must fight them!”¹²⁹ How taking refuge becomes a call to fight can be understood only in the context of Shari‘ati’s total sociological interpretation of Islam. Since *tawhid* is not merely a philosophical premise and since both *tawhid* and its antithesis have also and primarily a socio-political significance, taking refuge must be understood in its socio-political context.

¹²⁸ Ibid. See also Qur'an, Sura 2:213.

¹²⁹ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 121.

Moreover, since Abraham's movement involved active resistance to idolatry in this full sense of the word and active struggle for *tawhid* in its full meaning, refuge must not be understood to be merely passive. The conclusion of the matter can be only that taking refuge in the Lord of the dawn means to forcibly establish a society based on *tawhid*. Shari'ati indicates this understanding of taking refuge when he states,

To oppose the Satanic power of 'Khannas' (the sneaky whisperer), one has to seek refuge in unity (*tawhid*). To eradicate the structure of polytheism [or idolatry] in human consciousness and in society, you have to find the three powers of 'ownership', 'sovereignty' and 'divinity' in Almighty God alone. By doing this, you are able to establish an Abelian...society (i.e., a society based on equality and oneness of mankind).¹³⁰

To raise the consciousness of the believers, to establish social justice, to be a freedom-fighter (*mujahed*): this was the mission of Abraham and has since been entrusted to his followers, through the prophet Muhammad.

Abraham and Ishmael

The destruction of the three idols is the end of the first stage of the battle. Now, Shari'ati proclaims, "You are Ibrahim... You are in the position to sacrifice your Ismail for 'Him'!"¹³¹ Two ideas present themselves in this sentence. The first concerns the transformation of an identity. Now, you are Abraham. Abraham's pilgrimage is a journey of becoming, of becoming a man (*insān*) in the philosophical sense, as opposed to a mere human being (*bashar*) in the biological sense. As the believer follows in the

¹³⁰ Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 144.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

path of Abraham, doing what Abraham did, there occurs a mystical union or transformation of one to the other. The *mujahed* (freedom-fighter), through participating in the symbolic actions of the *hajj*, is becoming Abraham. At the same time, to be Abraham means to carry a heavy responsibility; it means absolute commitment to obedience. "You are Ibrahim," Shari'ati announces, "but to be 'obedient' is much more difficult. You have to be 'absolutely free.'¹³² This, the second concept in the sentence is, as we shall discover, deeply connected with the notion of idolatry.

Shari'ati's interpretation of Abraham's call to sacrifice his son Ishmael,¹³³ which signifies for him the second and far more difficult stage of the battle against idolatry, involves two major issues. The first concerns the real and symbolic significance of the person to be sacrificed, the identity of Ishmael, and the second, the reasons why he must be sacrificed, including what it means to sacrifice. We will examine each of these issues in turn.

The identity of Ishmael

Shari'ati presents Ishmael as Abraham's "most beloved,"¹³⁴ the one who had been born to him after long and painful years of his wife Sarah's barrenness. The story

¹³² Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 87.

¹³³ The Qur'an itself is ambiguous as to which of Abraham's sons, Ishmael or Isaac, was the intended sacrificial victim. Firestone's study of the Abraham-Ishmael legends in Islamic exegesis notes that several traditionists (all of whom he names) support both, depending on the report. In total, the number of reports that support Isaac is virtually equal to the number that support Ishmael (131 to 133 respectively). See Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, pp. 135-44 and pp. 170-78. Shari'ati does not even mention the possibility of Isaac. His main concern, as usual, is not with facts of history but with interpretation.

¹³⁴ Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 36.

follows the traditional biblical and qur'anic account of how Sarah offered Abraham her servant, Hajar, so that Abraham could sire a child through her, how Ishmael was born and how they were later sent helpless into the desert because of Sarah's jealousy. In Shari'ati's interpretation, Abraham desires to have a son so that he would carry on his father's movement (*nahzat*).¹³⁵ With the help of God, Ishmael and Hajar are preserved and Ishmael goes on to build the *ka'ba*, "the reminder of the first revolt of truth, ideology and struggle,"¹³⁶ with his father and become "the giver of life to his father's movement."¹³⁷ Ishmael, therefore, is someone who is crucial to the continuation of the struggle against idolatry for, in addition to being Abraham's son, he is the son of a despised slave-girl. Along with his mother, Ishmael was himself one of the oppressed, liberated only by an act of God (*tawhid*). This, more than his biological heredity, qualifies him to be the most eligible successor to Abraham's movement.¹³⁸

At the same time, however, the "most beloved" functions as a symbol of idolatry itself. That Ishmael is intensely beloved to Abraham means also that he has the potential of coming between Abraham and God. The depth of Abraham's love for his son can prevent him from fully obeying the commands of God. By extension, Shari'ati concludes, there is an Ishmael in everyone's life.

Who is your Ismail or what is it? Your position? Your honor?
Profession? Money? House? Farm? Car? Love? Family?

¹³⁵ See Shari'ati, *Mi 'ad ba 'Ibrahim*, p. 39. It is revealing that Shari'ati does not refer to Abraham's call as his mission (*risalat*), a religious term that would suggest a predominantly religious interpretation.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ This seems a somewhat aberrant view for a Shi'i, given the emphasis in Shi'ism on biological inheritance of the prophet's knowledge and authority.

Knowledge? Social class? Art? Dress? Name? Your life? Your youth? Your beauty...? How do I know? But you know it yourself...whatever weakens your faith, whatever stops you from 'going', whatever causes you to be self-centered, whatever makes you unable to hear the message and confess the truth, whatever forces you to 'escape', whatever causes you to rationalize for the sake of convenience, whatever makes you blind and deaf...You are in the position of Ibrahim whose weakness was in his love for Ismail (his son).¹³⁹

Whatever your Ishmael, Shari'ati insists, it must be sacrificed for the sake of your faith.

The reasons for sacrifice

The story of Abraham and his son is, for Shari'ati, the story of ultimate and total victory over self and of absolute surrender to the reality of *tawhid*. It is the final and perfect demonstration of a man's readiness to serve God, to the exclusion of all others, including oneself. Shari'ati speaks of the four prisons of man: nature, history, society and self. The first three can be overcome, he says, by the corresponding branch of knowledge because knowledge enables a person to determine his/her own destiny. Without it, people are mere puppets in the hands of the manipulators of power. However, the last prison, the prison of the self with its weaknesses and human instincts, cannot be overcome by mere knowledge because it is an internal prison. It requires a power that is stronger than knowledge and this liberating power, Shari'ati argues, is love.¹⁴⁰ "By love I mean an Almighty force (which is beyond my rational and discretionary faculty) in the very depth of my being that can blow me apart and

¹³⁹ Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 84.

¹⁴⁰ See Shari'ati, *Man and Islam*, p. 60.

help me to rebel against my self.” Furthermore, it is “a power which invites me to go against my profits and well-being and sacrifice myself for others and the ideals that I hold so dear.”¹⁴¹ Being able to revolt against oneself and one’s deepest affections demonstrates, for Shari‘ati, the ultimate proof of the reality of choice. It is, in fact, the power to choose one’s own death in order to be born a free man. Far from effecting the death of Ishmael, Abraham’s obedience was a choice for the death of himself. For Shari‘ati, this represents the final stage of becoming *insān*, a truly free man,¹⁴² and the fulfillment of one’s “migration to eternity toward the Almighty Allah,” spoken of earlier. This expression is interpreted in this context by Benson to denote a path to political freedom by means of and in connection with the liberation of the self from its own internal prison.¹⁴³

The greatest war (*jihād al-akbar*), Shari‘ati believes, is essentially this choice of serving God or one’s Ishmael, one’s faith or one’s self—one’s feeling, as he puts it. To choose the latter would be to give the victory to Satan and to idolatry. It is obvious to Shari‘ati what Abraham must do. After defeating all the idols outside himself, he must not allow Satan to build an idol inside him. He must not give in to any explanations (*tawjīh*) that would seek to justify “making alterations in your faith in order to cope with worldly demands.”¹⁴⁴ Abraham could easily have dismissed God’s command as

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁴³ See Benson, “Islam and Social Change,” p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 92.

only a dream.¹⁴⁵ In Shari‘ati’s opinion, this would have caused him to rationalize avoiding his responsibility.

That Abraham faced this challenge so late in life demonstrates for Shari‘ati that the danger of idolatry is always there. After a hundred years of victory over idolatry, Abraham, the most illustrious rebel in history, was still vulnerable. His obedience, in spite of the pain, illustrates his commitment to responsibility even when it is inconvenient, when it conflicts with his natural affections. However, Shari‘ati affirms, “Emotional obligations are the least important when compared to my ideology.”¹⁴⁶ It is a bitter experience, he admits, “to throw yourself into the fire in order to save other people.”¹⁴⁷ The true follower of Abraham must “disregard the joy and love of Ismail”¹⁴⁸ in his commitment to justice; he must “sacrifice” whatever stands in the way of obeying God. The way becomes lonelier and lonelier as one progresses further on this path.

That Shari‘ati sees Abraham’s trial of sacrifice as something of benefit to others is curious, as is his perception that in sacrificing his son, Abraham “seize[d] the sword from the hand of the executioner.”¹⁴⁹ Was the murder of Ishmael inevitable? Shari‘ati

¹⁴⁵ The Qur'an indeed presents the “command” as coming to Abraham in a dream. (Sura 37:102). Although it is possible, as some have done, to read it as occurring only in his dream, most traditional exegetes interpret the story as literal. See Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, pp. 107-115, for a discussion of two alternative interpretations of the significance of the sacrifice by the exegetes. It is understood by some as the fulfillment of a vow that Abraham made and by others as a test which would ultimately qualify Abraham to be “the patriarch of Islam,” p. 108. In the latter, the devil tries to thwart Abraham’s obedience through “compelling and logical arguments,” p. 113.

¹⁴⁶ Shari‘ati, *Hajj*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

suggests that it was because in their struggle against idolatry, all who follow Abraham are subject to punishment by oppressors. It is the history of Shi'ism and the reality of the present time.¹⁵⁰ The willing sacrifice of one, Shari'ati suggests, forestalls the death of many.

Ibrahim, sacrifice your son Ismail! Cut his throat with your own hands to save the people's neck from being cut. Which people? Those who have been sacrificed at the steps of the palaces of power or near the plunderer's treasures or inside the temples of hypocrisy and misery!¹⁵¹

To show the seriousness of his opposition to idolatry or oppression, Abraham would take the gruesome act of killing his son into his own hands. In that way, he would be showing solidarity with those who have already been killed by the Satanic trinity of power, money and hypocritical religion. It is an act of courage.

Conclusion

We may conclude from the foregoing that Shari'ati's image of Abraham as a model of rebellion against spiritual and political idolatry is, in as much as it draws upon familiar and traditional themes, in accord with the qur'anic image of Abraham. However, in as much as it deviates from the historic and traditional interpretation of these themes, it is original and innovative. The Abraham who opposes idolatry, according to Shari'ati, does so according to an understanding of idolatry and *tawhid*

¹⁵⁰ See above and Ali Shari'ati, "Shahadat" *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, edited by Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (Houston: The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986) pp. 189ff.

¹⁵¹ Shari'ati, *Hajj*, p. 36.

that is derived from a modern historical context and modern methods of social analysis. What for others remains within the realm of religious doctrine, for Shari‘ati, enters the world of social structures. In consequence, Abraham functions as the leader of an ongoing liberation movement, the aim of which is to liberate mankind from various sorts of determinisms, political, economic and religious.

At the same time, there is a mystical thread discernable throughout Shari‘ati’s revolutionary interpretation of Abraham, a phenomenon that may be attributed to Shari‘ati’s interpretive methodology of symbolism. While the literal meaning of qur’anic stories is not denied, the ‘real’ meaning lies beyond the ordinary definition of the words, to be found instead in their symbolic and metaphorical significance, a significance that transcends place, time, and even person. For Shari‘ati, the person who follows Abraham, who behaves as Abraham did, perpetuates Abraham’s movement and is, himself or herself, one with and the same as Abraham.

Finally, according to Shari‘ati’s symbolic interpretation, the story of Abraham shows a progression of obedience to the reality of *tawhīd*. While Abraham begins his mission as a faithful monotheist, in the sense of the word that Shari‘ati claims for it, he also grows and develops a more profound commitment to *tawhīd* through the trials he faces and through the opposition set against him by the forces of idolatry. The story of Abraham’s worship of one God is thus the story of the life of a great freedom-fighter whose commitment to the cause of *tawhīd* in self and society takes precedence over all things, even that which is dearest to him. In the end, it is the model of a holistic

revolutionary whose internal spiritual rebellion, the mystical dimension, is matched by political rebellion against all, spiritual and political, that is contrary to *tawhid*. It is the model that Shari‘ati himself sought to emulate and for which he also paid with his life.

CHAPTER TWO

Abraham in Latin American Liberation Theology

Historical Sketch of the Development of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology can be defined as the product of an indigenous process of theologizing within the context of social, political and religious realities of a specific place, time and culture—that of 20th century Roman Catholic Latin America. In other words, it is the result of a contextualization or indigenization of a universal theology in which there exist necessary and intrinsic implications for praxis within concrete historical reality. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, liberation theology's eminent theologian, it is “a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word,” suggesting “not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way to do theology.*”¹

Alfred T. Hennelly notes that for several centuries—since the advent of Roman Catholicism in Latin America until the middle of the 20th century—the church in Latin America had retained largely a European and, to a lesser extent, an American identity.² Thomas Bruneau explains this phenomenon as a result of the coalition between the Portuguese crown and the Roman Catholic church during the colonial period. As conversion was mandatory, there was little need for the development of a lay leadership built upon personal conviction. After the church became separate from

¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973) pp. 13 & 15.

² See Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990) p. 2.

the state in 1889, bishops continued to be appointed by Rome, and the general orientation of the clergy was towards a largely Europeanized urban minority. The majority underdeveloped rural population and their popular religious forms were given little serious attention.³

Towards the middle of the 20th century, forces of change were affecting all of Latin America, not least in the spiritual and religious demography of the continent. A major turning point in the church's approach to socio-historical change evolved around the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and Pope John XXIII's global social vision of the church.⁴ According to Hennelly, two events prior to Vatican II also helped awaken Latin Americans to their status as a mirror for others and inspire hope for change. The first, American association with the overthrow of a reformist government in Guatemala in 1954, "awakened antagonisms still smoldering from a long history of American interventions, especially in Central America."⁵ The second, the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959, inspired Latin Americans with hope for devising indigenous solutions to social and political problems. Gradually, Hennelly explains, the image of the church as a mirror of "the experience, pastoral approaches, and theological works

³ See Thomas C. Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil: The Politics of Religion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) pp. 11-20.

⁴ See Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, pp. 1-2; also Daniel H. Levine, ed., *Churches and Politics in Latin America* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1980) pp. 20-21 and idem, ed., *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1896) p. 8.

⁵ Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, p. 2.

of Europe and...the United States”⁶ began to emerge in the consciousness of the Latin church.

Added to this new consciousness was a heightened awareness of the peculiar realities of Latin American society, more particularly the dehumanizing poverty of the masses and the excessive wealth of the elite. While the popular religious imagination, reinforced by official church and government structures, would traditionally have mythologized this situation as “the will of God,” obviating any responsibility on the part of man both as to the causes of and the solutions for poverty, the theological musings of the church in this era began to view social injustice distinctly as sin. God, therefore, was not the source of poverty, nor was it consistent with “Absolute Love” that man should be abandoned to “constant victimization and total destitution.”⁷ The biblical narrative of Cain and Abel became the paradigm for a man-centered theology of sin defined in terms of man’s inhumanity to man.⁸

This process of conscientization required, first, a demythologizing of reality, whether the responsibility for injustice be named as God or destiny, and second, a realization that man is free to act and initiate change. “[Conscientization] means that humans take on a role as subjects making the world, remaking the world; it asks

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Paulo Freire, “Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” in Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, p. 11.

⁸ Coming from a different context, Carol Meyers notes that the word “sin” (which here includes such equivalents as “transgression” or “iniquity”) is used for the first time in Genesis precisely in the Cain and Abel narrative and not, as can easily be assumed, in the Eden narrative. See *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 87-8.

humans to fashion their existence out of the material that life offers them.”⁹ According to Paulo Freire, conscientization involves an admittedly *utopian* vision of the world, a word which he defines as the two-fold task of “denouncing and announcing—denouncing the dehumanizing structure and announcing the structure that will humanize.”¹⁰ This, Freire asserts, is the true vocation of the church and compelling task of theology. Understanding Freire in this light, Phillip Berryman suggests that the primary aim of theology “should be to aid Christians to do what God wants and not merely to adhere to correct doctrinal formulas.”¹¹ Being a Christian is thus a matter of *orthopraxis*, praxis being defined as “action with reflection,”¹² as much as *orthodoxy*.

During the course of Vatican II, a meeting took place in Brazil in 1964 in order for Latin American bishops to reflect theologically “on their own unique context and their own culture.”¹³ At this, the first of many such gatherings, Gutiérrez presented a comprehensive and influential address that provided the substance of what soon came to be known as liberation theology. He emphasized the need for the church to reexamine its mission vis-à-vis the three major groups of people of which Latin American society is composed—the masses, the intellectual and technocratic elite, and

⁹ Freire, “Conscientizing as A Way of Liberating,” p. 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

¹¹ Phillip Berryman. *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) p. 85-86.

¹² Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, p. 86.

¹³ Roberto Oliveros Maqueo, “Meeting of Theologians at Petrópolis’ (March 1964)” in Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, p. 44.

the conservative aristocracy—and to formulate a suitable pastoral approach on the basis of this evaluation.

Following from this gathering, the second General Conference of Latin American bishops took place at Medellín, Colombia in 1968. Many observers consider this conference as significant to Latin America as Vatican II was to the universal church.¹⁴ Here, the bishops acknowledged that a denunciation of unjust social realities—the investment of the continent’s resources in “the arms race, excessive bureaucracy, luxury, and ostentation, or the deficient administration of the community”¹⁵—was consistent with the message of the gospel and was a part of the mission of the church. In reflecting on the causes of poverty, it was understood, in accordance with “dependency theory,” which the conference adopted as legitimate, that poverty was due as much to structural injustice as to personal sin, and that “developmentalism” would never effect the liberation of the poor. Liberation required radical structural change on the ideological and practical level. At the same time, it was affirmed that in no way does this annul the need for internal transformation through the gospel; rather, one is ineffective without the other. “We will not have a new continent without new and reformed structures, but above all, there will be no new continent without new human beings who know how to be truly free and responsible to

¹⁴ See Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, p. 89; Levine, *Churches and Politics in Latin America*, p. 23; and J. Andrew Kirk, *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979) p. 28.

¹⁵ Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, p. 92.

the light of the gospel.”¹⁶ Thus, Medellín emphasized the unity of faith and life and the urgency of action in support of human good.

In the decade following Medellín, the theology of liberation generated fierce controversy. Conservative bishops could point to the persistence of a seriously depressing scenario: “worsening conditions for the poor majorities in Latin America, transnationalization of the economies, proliferating military regimes, increasing repression, violence, torture, and assassination.”¹⁷ Many saw the credibility of the theology of liberation as seriously threatened by a strong conservative opposition, subversively financed by the CIA.¹⁸ They seriously feared that the Catholic left would be denounced at the proposed meeting of bishops in Puebla, held in January 1979. In fact, as Berryman notes, participants at Puebla were overwhelmingly conservative, implying an attempt to predetermine the outcome of the meeting. At the same time, numerous groups sympathetic to the cause of liberation also convened at Puebla.¹⁹

The outcome was not as anticipated, although, as Berryman suggests, conflict was clearly in evidence. While social evil was again forcefully denounced, the causes of injustice suggested two possible theories, conventional and radical, both of which surfaced in the models of social change put forward by individuals. Berryman’s analysis optimistically asserts that extensive use of the phrase “preferential option for

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁷ Berryman, “What Happened at Puebla,” in Levine, *Churches and Politics in Latin America*, p. 60.

¹⁸ See Gregory Baum “German Theologians and Liberation Theology,” in Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, p. 222.

¹⁹ Berryman, “What Happened at Puebla,” pp. 62-63.

the poor”²⁰—being mentioned in several documents and supported by a theology that sees the poor as the prime targets of the liberating mission of Christ—could be used as an interpretative key for what is not obviously stated elsewhere. In this connection, he sees Puebla’s encouragement of “the evangelizing potential of the poor”²¹ as tacit endorsement for the proliferation of *comunidades eclesiales de base* (Christian Base Communities or CEBs), a movement of tremendous significance to the development of an indigenous social Catholicism in Latin America, especially in Brazil.

Church base communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base*) may be defined as small lay-led communities, motivated by Christian faith, that see themselves as part of the church and that are committed to working together to improve their communities and to establish a more just society.²²

²⁰ Introduced at Medellin, the position was confirmed and ratified at Puebla. A Puebla Final Document, entitled “A Preferential Option for the Poor” states, “We affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation.” Hennelly, *Liberation Theology*, p. 254. Gutiérrez describes this phrase as consisting of three elements: poor, option, preference. He explains, “The ‘poverty’ of which we speak is material poverty, the ‘preference,’ spiritual poverty, and the ‘option,’ the commitment against poverty.” Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor: Assessment and Implications,” *ARC, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill*, 22 (1994) p. 5.

²¹ Berryman, “What Happened at Puebla,” pp. 72-73

²² Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, p. 64. Berryman estimates that in 1967 there were more than 70,000 CEBs in Brazil alone, with a total membership of two and a half million people. *Ibid.*, p. 63. A later publication by the same author claims that this figure is grossly exaggerated and suggests that the correct figure is closer to 250,000 people. See Berryman, *Religion in the Megacity: Catholic and Protestant Portraits from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996) p. 66. Whether this might also represent a drop in the figures from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s is open to consideration. In *Religion in the Megacity*, Berryman states that CEBs were at their height of popularity in 1978 which was also one of the most repressive times politically. In both of these publications he notes that there are far more active Protestants and evangelicals, particularly Pentecostals, than there are members of CEBs. Furthermore, he refers to John Burdick’s research which suggests that members of the CEBs are also “far less socially active than much of the literature had implied.” *Ibid.*, p. 65. See also Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, p. 72. For a more conservative assessment of the CEBs both quantitatively and qualitatively, see W.E. Hewitt, “Myths and Realities of Liberation Theology: The Case of Basic Christian Communities in Brazil,” in R.L. Rubenstein & J.F. Roth, *The Politics of Latin America: Liberation Theology* (Washington: The Washington Institute Press, 1988). See also John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil’s Religious Arena* (Berkeley: University of California

Of the potential of CEBs for social revolution, expectations seem to have gradually diminished over the last decade. Begun by priests and nuns partly to address the extremely high ratio of people to priests, and to provide a setting where individuals would not be anonymous, CEBs also represented a potential seedbed of revolutionary enthusiasm. “Deep down pastoral agents thought that base communities would be the spearhead of a social revolution, a social transformation, a new society. So, working in base communities was a way of preparing for the new Latin American society.”²³ However, the lay people were attracted to the communities as a way of satisfying their hunger for a powerful spiritual message and of gaining greater independence from priests.²⁴

Carlos Mesters, whose theology we will be examining below, maintains that Bible reading in the CEBs goes beyond the level common to many groups in Brazil meeting around the Bible today. Mesters outlines three ways the Bible can be read. In the first, reading the Bible is related only to personal piety and does not address community life. In the second way, although the people meet on the community level, their intent is to gain knowledge of biblical facts. Current issues facing the community do not enter into their understanding of the text. In the third way, the people meet as a community in order to discover what the Bible has to say to such community problems

Press, 1993) pp. 183, 206-220, where the author counters the commonly held misconception that Protestants, particularly Pentecostals, are politically apathetic.

²³ Berryman, quoting Jose Comblin in *Religion in the Megacity*, p. 69.

²⁴ Comblin uses strikingly Protestant and even Evangelical language in his evaluation of the CEBs. He states, “What is required is entering into the people’s psychology. It has to be a conversion movement, like the early Baptists and the Methodists.” Berryman, *Religion in the Megacity*, pp. 69-70.

as exploitative landlords. “In the third situation,” Mesters says, “we have a community of people meeting around the Bible who inject concrete reality and their own situation into the discussion. Their struggle as a people enters the picture.”²⁵ Consequently, through the Bible, the people develop “a more critical awareness of reality.”²⁶

This method, Mesters points out, involves three components. Reading the Bible in terms of their own lives, the Bible becomes a mirror in which the people see themselves and their own histories. Secondly, the Bible is seen as the community’s book and reading it is a community activity. Thirdly, the text is approached in order to derive direction as to how to live in obedience to its message. Together, Mesters explains, they comprise a “spirituality of popular interpretation.”²⁷ Berryman refers to this approach as the “‘hermeneutical circle’—interpretation moves from experience to text to experience.”²⁸ In presenting the figure of Abraham, Mesters relies upon this method of interpretation, going beyond the literal meaning of the text and finding the world of the Latin American poor in that of Abraham.

The Sociopolitical Context and the Church in Brazil

According to Bruneau, more than 90% of Brazil’s 120 million people are members of the Catholic church, making Brazil the largest Catholic country in the

²⁵ Mesters, “The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People,” p. 16.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁷ Mesters, “Listening to What the Spirit is Saying to the Churches,” p. 108.

²⁸ Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, p. 60.

world.²⁹ The separation of church and state in 1889 resulted in its political influence and religious offices being severely curtailed. The idea that religious influence was tied to political power persisted, however, and the church continued to seek its support base among the ruling elite and middle to upper classes. Separation from the state also resulted in the development of closer ties to Rome and the building up of its institutional structure so that "by 1930 the church resembled a relatively efficient, large, bureaucratic organization" which was "patterned in almost all respects on a European model largely irrelevant to Brazilian life."³⁰ Most neglected were the rural peasants who made up the majority of the population.

In the midst of turbulent social and political changes sweeping the country between 1950 and 1964, the church's very existence was threatened. The need for social structural change was evident and progressive elements within the church began a program of social change which it perceived as an essential prerequisite to the relevance of its religious message. As Bruneau observes, this represented a major shift in the church's approach to influence, coinciding with parallel changes promoted in Vatican II. In 1964 Brazil was engulfed by a military coup that inaugurated a reign of terror until civilian government was elected in 1985. During the height of government

²⁹ See Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil*, p. xiv. A more recent statistic is given by Patrick Johnstone in *Operation World: The Day-by-Day Guide to Praying for the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993). He gives the population statistics for 1990 as 150,368,000, only 68% of which are Roman Catholic (120,000,000), p. 128. Figures for Iran, the largest Shi'i country in the world, are given as 87% of the 1990 population of 56,585,000 (49,000,000), p. 304.

³⁰ Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil*, pp. 17-18.

authoritarianism—1966-1973—which commonly utilized torture and repression, the church adopted an oppositional position to the state.

The state assumed a socioeconomic policy that was harmful to the majority of the population while it relied upon a Doctrine of National Security, what Bruneau considers its “official ideology,” to legitimize its absolute power and to justify its brutal repression of anything construed as a threat to security.³¹ There was no place, Bruneau states, for any consideration of the interests of the people.

In the [then] current regime’s conception of the state and nation, the term ‘people’ has no meaning; the concept of the population en masse, let alone as individuals, never appears in the national security literature. The power of the state is absolute and indivisible; society is subject to that power, and the individual is rewarded only indirectly by the country’s increased economic power and international prestige.³²

In response to this position, the church found itself obliged by its own conscience and by decisions taken at Vatican II and at Medellín to speak out. Adopting a prophetic position in denouncing political oppression, especially of the poor, in the name of the Gospel, the church now found itself in diametrical opposition to the regime, a position for which it also paid heavily in terms of human life, several priests, bishops and religious adding to the number of those brutally tortured and murdered, frequently by landlords. For some time, church-state conflict was not made public due to state censorship of the press and promises of reform, but in 1973, Berryman notes, several bishops drafted an open rebuke to the military dictatorship entitled “I

³¹ See Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil*, pp. 53-58.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Have Heard the Cry of My People," clearly drawing upon the Exodus motif. Several such documents were published, including one in 1977 entitled "Christian Requirements of a Political Order," a document which bore testimony to "the sin that is found in the heart of man, contaminating all his personal, family, and social life."³³ The theology of liberation had taken root in Brazil; the prophetic voice of the church would no longer be silent.

Mesters' Image of Abraham

In broad terms, it may be said that the image of Abraham presented by Mesters conforms to the principal concerns of Latin American social realities outlined above, as well as to the central themes of liberation theology and depends less on traditional Christian interpretation of the Abraham narratives. Nevertheless, the centrality of faith in the life of a Christian is plainly evident in Mesters' portrayal of Abraham in a way that it is not, as we will see, in José Miranda's understanding of authentic religion. This demonstrates a significant theological distinction between two streams of thought within liberation theology itself, an evangelical or faith-based system more closely identified with traditional Christianity and one that is defined entirely by liberative social action.

In his interpretation of Abraham, Mesters alludes to contemporary (1970s) sociopolitical conditions of Brazil. He speaks of the endless cycle of poverty, inhuman

³³ Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil*, p. 77.

living conditions of the poor, exploitation by landlords and employers, the wealth of the rich buying up all the land, bringing the common people to poverty and forced migration in search of a decent livelihood. “They, the poor, are driven out, persecuted, even murdered.”³⁴ The poor are in need of someone who will execute justice on their behalf. Into this context he introduces Abraham.

The Abraham presented by Mesters is one who, because of his ‘economic misery’,³⁵ left his home and wandered in the desert seeking a land to call his own. Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner interpret Abraham’s migration as his refusal to live according to the urban social system of his day. Rather, he chose to live on the margins of society in obedience to God’s call and yet he was able to command respect from the settled nobility, thereby honouring a system of justice that favours the marginalized.³⁶ Like the multitudes of voiceless, landless, oppressed, exploited,

³⁴ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 9.

³⁵ Without using the same terminology, Karl-Josef Kuschel may be said to represent a more common view in his allusion to Abraham’s “lesser social status” as an occasion for God to display His grace, rather than as a hardship. *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (New York: Continuum, 1995) p. 19.

³⁶ See Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989) pp. 14-15. See also Anthony Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992) pp. 46-47. Ceresko supports the idea of the Patriarchs as socially and politically marginalized. He affirms that they were interested in forming independent communities outside of the control of the abusive city-state rulers who were considered the “sole possessor[s] of all property and whatever it produced—by divine right.” Their regular display of greed provoked the Patriarchs’ migration in search of land in an attempt to flee from this exploitative system. The centrality of “the land” in God’s promises is also indicative of this. Van Seters makes a cryptic reference to this thesis in suggesting that the nomadic lifestyle “is contrasted with that of the city-dwellers with a hint of antagonism towards this corrupt social form.” John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) p. 38. While C. Westermann agrees with G. von Rad that the migration can best be explained theologically—obedience to God—he emphasizes the divine purpose of rescue from a crisis situation and rejects the notion of a “call” as well as a “test of faith”, given that Abraham was accustomed to the nomadic life. C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) pp. 145-48. For the

defenseless poor of Brazilian society, Mesters' Abraham is a deprived migrant worker. In him, the poor who trust in God and seek just solutions find their hope, their identity and their voice.

Today [Abraham] is called Carlos, Altamiro, Luis...He is the Indio, the people, the squatter in a land not his own. He is the 'posseiro' and the tenant, the student and the rubber worker, the laborer and the tenant farmer, the emigrant and the unemployed who does odd jobs. He is each and everyone of these people, wandering without destiny, seeking without finding, millions of Brazilian families.³⁷

Being a response to the call of God, Abraham's migration contains responsibilities and promises. He is called to oppose evil and "recover the blessing"³⁸ promised by God. Were the Abraham of today to be successful in realizing his hopes, Mesters asserts, the face of the earth would be radically different; it would be a new world of justice, faith, hope and love. For this reason, the powerful of this world fear Abraham; he is a threat to their way of life, their wealth and their control. Abraham, then, is not simply an unlearned migrant, but someone who is acutely aware of social injustice, who has been conscientized in the sense that Freire speaks of and who is thus in the process of remaking his world. To follow Abraham, Mesters maintains, is to consciously confront social injustice through commitment to the call of God. The Bible, according to this model, serves as a mirror for contemporary social conditions and provides inspiration for human activity in consonance with God's way.

³⁶ "test of faith" view see G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1963) pp. 158-61.

³⁷ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

It is easy to see that Mesters intends that Abraham serve as a model for radical religiously motivated social activism. Radical because it confronts the status quo without apology, religious because it is motivated and informed by the Bible, activist because it does not passively acquiesce to injustice, and social because it is concerned not just with individuals but with the needs of the community as a whole. The alternative religious model, that of resignation to perceived unalterable social conditions while finding consolation in the hope of a better afterlife, is one that has long been preached and, predictably, liberation theology maintains, little has changed.

This brief summary and analysis of Mesters' presentation of Abraham can be divided into three main theological and sociological themes: Abraham's God, Abraham's mission and Abraham's people. We will examine these themes as they are developed within the broader context of the socio-religious thought of Latin American liberation theology and with occasional reference to the standard Christian exegetical tradition's understanding of Abraham. Firstly, we will look at the God of Abraham who is repeatedly referred to as the God of life and frequently the God of justice. This will be contrasted with what Mesters usually calls false gods and what other liberation theologians identify as idols, or more specifically, idols of death. The roots of injustice and evil, the relationship of injustice to idolatry, and the faith-based struggle of the people against injustice for which Abraham is seen as a model, will form the second section of our inquiry. Lastly, we will explore the concept of the church as a social entity and the role of the common people in social change, ideas that emerge from

Abraham's role in forming the people of God. We will attempt to show, firstly, that although Mesters writes for an audience that is not theologically educated in the formal sense of the word, his use of Abraham as a model for social change has potential for rich theological discussion. Secondly, we will see that the theology behind his writing is profoundly shaped by the central teachings of liberation theology.

The God of Abraham³⁹

But the one true God exists in the face of those who are suffering, in the sweat of our oppression, in the muscle and sinew of our work. He stoops down to us, through his Son, to animate us in our struggle against the centuries old oppressor. God is in the people, and in their struggle against the slavery of the Egyptian, the Roman, and the Yankee. His salvation is the salvation of the poor, and how mightily He will punish the oppressors of the poor on that terrible day of reckoning!⁴⁰

The issue today, liberation theologians argue, is not atheism but idolatry. "What is at stake," Victorio Araya affirms, "is not an ontological issue—does God exist—but rather a concrete, historical issue: the death of the poor."⁴¹ In a world in which the antithesis of faith in the true God is not atheism but idolatry—the worship of and submission to false gods, which liberation theologians understand not merely as an

³⁹ The phrase first appears in Gen. 24. Since Albrecht Alt's study of the "God of the Fathers" in 1929, the exegetes are in agreement that it says nothing of the kind of God Abraham worshipped but rather, designates the God that is associated with Abraham and his clan, who later came to be identified as Yahweh. See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, pp. 108-9, and Kuschel, *Abraham*, p. 15. Here, we may use the phrase in this technical sense, but add to it the notion of what sort of God is the God associated with Abraham from the liberationist perspective.

⁴⁰ Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) p. xvii. From a Nicaraguan Mass.

⁴¹ Victorio Araya G., "The God of the Strategic Covenant" in Pablo Richard et al, *The Idols of Death and the God of Life: A Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983) p. 104.

issue of faith, but of politics also—there is implied a different question: what kind of a God is God?⁴² “Is God really on the side of those who are struggling for justice against oppression?”⁴³ The question is sociological as much as theological. As Araya insists, “From the oppressed world, and for any reflection that wants to assume the perspective of the poor, the question about God is inseparably linked with the political realm and the historical struggle against oppression.”⁴⁴ Beginning from a perspective of faith, Gutiérrez emphasizes, truly authentic theology asks how we can rightly speak of the “‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ the ‘God of Jesus Christ’”⁴⁵ in the real life context of “the struggle to transform history.”⁴⁶

Throughout his inspirational and motivational study of the life of Abraham, Mesters, like Ali Shari‘ati, does not concern himself with questions of historiography nor the exegetical tradition as such. Exegetes, Mesters comments, “using their heads and their studies, can come fairly close to Abraham; but their feet are a long way from Abraham. The common people are very close to Abraham with their feet.”⁴⁷ They identify with Abraham because they see themselves as sharing a similar life situation. Mesters writes for these people; his aim is not to wax eloquent, but to provide biblical, faith-based inspiration for a social activism rooted in God. Therefore, he presents the

⁴² See Richard, *The Idols of Death*, p. 3-4, 24; see also Araya, “The God of the Strategic Covenant,” pp. 103-106, and Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991) p. 48.

⁴³ Araya, “The God of the Strategic Covenant,” p. 104.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. xiii.

⁴⁶ Araya, “The God of the Strategic Covenant,” p. 104.

⁴⁷ Mesters, “The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People,” p. 20.

character of the God of Abraham in the context of contemporary struggles of the common people against socio-economic oppression and exploitation. As a result, the character of the God of Abraham as the God of life and the God of justice and liberation is set in contrast to that of the false gods or idols of social injustice that are said to cover evil, promote death and serve people's self interest. With frequent reference to the writings of prominent liberation theologians, and where relevant, to the exegetes, we will examine Mesters' portrayal of the God of Abraham.⁴⁸

The God of Life and the Idols of Death

Mesters speaks of the God of Abraham as the source and fountain of life, whose one concern is "to protect and favor life."⁴⁹ Referring to Gen. 1:22 and 28, he declares that life is something that God has not only created but has also blessed; that is, God has spoken the good over life.⁵⁰ The path of life, Gutiérrez likewise affirms, is "the

⁴⁸ Here, it should be noted that Mesters' concern is with the *character* of the true God, rather than with the ontological nature of God. He does not, therefore, discuss issues such as the trinitarian nature of God. This is unfortunate, for it results in a neglect of the socio-political correlates of a trinitarian image of God that are of profound significance, particularly in the context of a comparison with the socio-political derivatives of Shari'ati's absolute monotheism. For an illuminating discussion of socio-political trinitarianism in liberation theology see Leonardo Boff, "Trinity," *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993) pp. 75-89. Within these pages, Boff presents a harsh critique of absolute, or what he calls "rigid," monotheism. He posits that socio-political relations of inequality and authoritarianism are founded on a vision of God that neglects the co-existence and communion of a trinity of divine persons. "...just as there is but one God, so there is but one king and one law." p. 76. On the other hand, he states, "The trinitarian mystery invites us to adopt social forms that value *all* relations among persons and institutions and foster an egalitarian, familial community in which differences will be positively welcomed. As the Christians of the base church communities have formulated it: The holy Trinity is the best community." p. 85.

⁴⁹ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 30.

⁵⁰ In contrast, Von Rad, *Genesis*: The blessing pronounced in vs. 22 & 28 has to do with the ability to procreate, to pass on the life received from God. In the case of v.28, it is used specifically to separate procreation from the image of God. pp. 56, 60-61. Likewise, Westermann: "To bless means 'to bestow with a dynamism to increase' (L. Köhler, *Lexikon*), and this is primarily the power of fertility given to

path of blessing.”⁵¹ That God has spoken the good over life, Mesters notes, is an eternal blessing which nourishes mankind’s hope in the future blessedness of a life that has been cursed, not by God, but by man himself in his rejection of the Lordship of God and effort to make himself master of all. The pronouncement of blessing upon Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3) signifies, for Mesters, that Abraham was called to “recover the blessing” spoken over creation and “to reconstruct life damaged by humans.”⁵² Being blessed with life, Abraham becomes, himself, a fountain of blessing to others. Thus, Mesters’ interpretation of blessing both upon creation and Abraham has more to do with a quality of life than the fact of its existence.⁵³

According to Gutiérrez, the God of biblical revelation is “a God who loves life; life is God’s will for all beings”⁵⁴—an image of God that is closely connected to the notion of liberation. The historical event of God’s liberation of the Hebrews from slavery is, for Gutiérrez, an event which “expresses the will to life of a God who continually liberates and blesses the people.”⁵⁵ Faith in God as the God of life is thus

humans and to beasts.” Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) p. 88.

⁵¹ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 6.

⁵² Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 32. Likewise, Kuschel’s observation that after several catastrophic events characterized by sin and destruction, the history of blessing begins anew with Abraham. p. 20.

⁵³ Von Rad again understands blessing to refer primarily to “a material increase in life, especially in the sense of physical fruitfulness (cf. Gen. 1:22).” *Genesis*. pp. 159-160. However, that the pronouncement here has additional spiritual significance is noted: “Abraham is assigned the role of a mediator of blessing in God’s saving plan, for ‘all the families of the earth.’” p. 160. Likewise, Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*. pp. 148-152. Van Seters affirms the meaning of “human fertility...and material prosperity...,” but sees a problem in the future orientation of the promise, leading him to connect it with the keeping of the law. *Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 272-76.

⁵⁴ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

grounded in God's liberative action and confirmed in the memory and will of the people who, because of their redemption from slavery, are called upon by God to enter into covenant relation with God. It is a covenant that contains two opposing alternatives for it promises life for obedience and death for rejection of God's commands—blessing or curse. The choice for life is coterminous with a choice for God. "To choose life means to choose God, to hold fast to God as a child does to its parents, who are the source and protectors of its life."⁵⁶

God's program for life is further demonstrated, Gutiérrez explains, through the work of the Messiah whose central message and ministry was the affirmation of life. In proclaiming and inaugurating the reign of God, a prominent theme in liberation theology which includes both a historical and transcendent dimension,⁵⁷ Jesus is simultaneously disengaging the forces of death and advancing the reign of life. In Luke 4:18-19, referred to by Gutiérrez as particularly illustrative of the will of God for life, Jesus presents himself as one who proclaims good news to the poor and liberty to captives. He restores sight to the blind, an expression which Gutiérrez interprets also in terms of liberation,⁵⁸ and sets free the oppressed. The God of Abraham, who is the

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁷ See a most useful study by Jon Sobrino called "Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology," *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993) pp. 38-74.

⁵⁸ This is based upon his analysis of the Greek translation of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament in which "opening of the eyes" is to be understood metaphorically because of its connection "to those in chains". The Hebrew text thus suggests "reference to freedom for those in prison", something which is eliminated in the Greek translation. See Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 8.

God of Jesus Christ, is therefore a God whose will for life embraces the notion of liberation.

For Mesters also, the meaning of life is understood in terms of what seeks to destroy it, that is, the forces of death of which the scriptures speak in symbolic language. He suggests that references to formlessness and darkness in Gen. 1:1-2 are symbolic of the domination of death before life is permitted to emerge.⁵⁹ This, he suggests further, was the reality that surrounded Abraham. It was a time of moral and spiritual darkness, devoid of the word of God, "chaotic, lifeless, in confusion!"⁶⁰ When God's word came to Abraham—the same word, he remarks, which "to this day addresses to [sic] us through the events of our life"⁶¹— "the victorious struggle of life against death began..."⁶² God's domination of the universe by His word, or, it may be said, the reign of God, is that which brings into effect the promise of the victory of life over death. Begun in Abraham, it finds its complete fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus Christ,⁶³ an event that demonstrates conclusively that "life, not death, has the

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez gives a similar interpretation of Gen. 1:1-2 which he derives from a comparison with the opening paragraphs of John's gospel. In both accounts, life, equated in John's gospel with light, is hindered from emerging by darkness. He remarks on an interesting contrast. In Genesis, he says, "the darkness is not actively opposed to the light. In John, on the other hand, the image of darkness is laden with hostility: the darkness is expressly opposed to the acceptance of the word." *The God of Life*, p. 82. For Von Rad, darkness forms part of the description of the material chaos preceding and threatening God's creative activity. *Genesis*, pp. 49-51. See also Westermann, *Genesis I-II*, "Darkness is not to be understood as a phenomenon of nature but rather as something sinister." p. 104.

⁶⁰ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶³ See *ibid.*, p. 54. See also Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, pp. 14-15, and *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 161 & 263; Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982) p. 83. Elsa Tamez is one of several Protestant theologians, among whom are José Miguez Bonino and Kubem Alves, who have contributed to the Latin American liberation movement in Christianity.

final word in history.”⁶⁴ Although expressed theologically, the statement has clear sociological implications.

Death, as understood in liberation theology, refers not solely to the final demise of the mortal body but to the deprivation of the necessities of life in this world. It is manifest in the social realities of “oppression, hunger, selfishness, sickness, injustice, and, in the final analysis, ... sin, which is the characteristic stamp of death.”⁶⁵ Belief in the God of life implies simultaneously a rejection of all social conditions that inhibit the forces of life from being realized. It “entails defending the life of the weakest members of society...[and]...commitment to those who see their right to life being constantly violated.”⁶⁶ As Gutiérrez puts it,

When our rural brothers and sisters in Latin America claim the land to which they have a (human and historical) right, they are not seeking to have their names entered in the public record books of the country; they are asking only to exercise their right to life.⁶⁷

In Mesters’ understanding, Abraham represents these Latin American brothers and sisters because he also was a landless peasant who left his home in the hope of becoming a people and acquiring property and ownership.⁶⁸ The land he obtained was only a beginning, a tomb in which to bury his wife. Even so, his ownership of this

⁶⁴ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 15.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 28. Likewise, Tamez ranks death in the same category as “the accumulation of wealth stolen from the poor...the powerlessness of the poor...unjust administration of authority...degradation of the oppressed...deception, lies...” Life, on the other hand, is associated with “an equitable distribution of possessions and power and, with it, the elimination of poverty...just government[,] humanization... freedom” *Bible of the Oppressed*, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁶⁸ See Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 43.

burial plot assured his descendants of the right to a piece of land because he obtained it through legal purchase and not as the result of a donation.⁶⁹

The dialectic of the God of life and the forces of death has further theological and sociological significance both in Mesters' understanding of Abraham and in the theology of liberation. While sociological opposition to the God of life presents itself in the denial of human rights, a battle is waged also on the ideological level. Here, the dialectic employs the language of false gods and idols. From the apocryphal book of Judith (Jdt. 5:7), Mesters observes that initially, Abraham followed the false gods of his family.⁷⁰ Though he does not specify what those gods were, he suggests that they were made by man for his own benefit and self-interest and for the detriment of others. In the contemporary context, Mesters specifies them as the "gods invented by society: money, profit, power, grandeur, social position, expertise, easy life, pleasure, etc."⁷¹ Their purpose being to dominate, manipulate and exploit the lives of others, they can appear both on the level of the individual as well as the state. Furthermore, the sinister nature of idols and their dissimilarity to the true God is discernible in the fact that they

⁶⁹ This thesis, supported by Wellhausen, is rejected by several exegetes including von Rad who gives the purchase of a tomb theological significance (as the Patriarchs were heirs of the promise only in death, so it is in Christ) and Westermann. The latter emphasizes the ritual importance—akin to birth, circumcision and marriage rituals—of possession of a burial plot. See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, p. 376, and von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 250. In either case, the benefit of possession is found only in relation to death.

⁷⁰ There is, of course, no hint of this in Genesis where the command is simply that Abraham should leave his father's house and country and become a sojourner in a strange land. Abraham's rejection of his father's idolatrous worship is introduced and elaborated in detail in *The Apocalypse of Abraham*.

⁷¹ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 38.

are invoked as justification for the negation of all human rights.⁷² Consequently, they are frequently referred to in the literature of liberation theology as “idols of death”.

According to Jon Sobrino, the dialectic of the God of life and idols of death is a fundamental tenet of the theology of liberation, a part of its “systematic content.”⁷³ A constant danger for all believers, idolatry is defined by Gutiérrez simply as “putting one’s trust in something or someone who is not God.”⁷⁴ It has also been defined as “a worship of the false gods of the system of oppression.” Furthermore, it is said, “All systems of oppression are characterized by the creation of gods and of idols that sanction oppression and anti-life forces.”⁷⁵ There is a noticeable link, therefore, between idolatry and oppression.

Pablo Richard speaks of two types of idolatry apparent in the Old Testament, the creation of cultic images of Yahweh and the worship of other or foreign gods, the latter of which lends itself more readily to the context of the present writing. Richard observes that idolatry in this sense, the violation of monotheism, posits a correspondence between the political and spiritual realms. Submission to the political rule of other peoples entails simultaneously a “recognition of the superiority of the god

⁷² Ibid., pp. 16-19.

⁷³ Sobrino & Ellacuria, *Systematic Theology*, p. x.

⁷⁴ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 49.

⁷⁵ Both quotes are from Richard, *The Idols of Death*, p. 1. Based on Rom. 1, José Miranda explains idolatry as being rooted in an objectification of God which results from a confusion over the nature of God. As it is God’s nature to command, to strip God of this power is to re-image God in the image of creation. “It is the human disposition of injustice which makes us neutralize the command in which, and only in which, God is God.” José P. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974) p. 42. Furthermore, the imposition of Greek philosophy upon Christianity objectified God by positing that it is the nature of God to be, rather than to command. p. 58.

of this people and submission to this other, or foreign, god (a theological problem).⁷⁶ Having no power in and of themselves, idols derive their power from human beings; therefore, their power is not transcendent nor divine nor liberating. Attributing this derived, oppressive, human power to God is what turns these man-made objects into idols with the power to oppress those who rebel against them. Faith in the true God, on the other hand, “illigitimizes the idols of oppression.”⁷⁷

Furthermore, a spiritual-political connection can be observed in the anti-idolatry command of Deuteronomy 6:14-15 which provides a theological framework for the subsequent commands against the abuse of political power in relation to the poor. God’s threat of anger with the people if they follow other gods (Deut. 6) is understood in relation to the prohibition against the accumulation of wealth, the building of military strength and the marrying of many wives in Deut. 16:14-20. Because of the nature of who God is, the God of life and justice, violation of the command to worship none but Him leads inevitably to the parallel consequence of political injustice. Gutiérrez takes this even further in suggesting that the worship of idols or false gods is the cause of the death of the poor who are sacrificed mercilessly because of the idolater’s insatiable craving for wealth.

The yearning for money and power stops at nothing; it tramples underfoot the rights of others and disregards the commandments of the God who calls for the protection of the poor and oppressed. This self-seeking causes the powerful among the Jewish people to shed innocent blood and turn Israel into a ‘bloody city’ (Ezek. 22:2), on

⁷⁶ Richard, *The Idols of Death*, p. 9.

⁷⁷ Araya, “The God of the Strategic Covenant,” p. 106.

which the Lord will pass judgment....God turned into an idol requires the shedding of blood.⁷⁸

For this reason, Jesus demands that a choice be made between serving God or serving money. (Matt. 6:24) The announcement that one cannot serve both God and the idol of mammon takes on greater significance when it is noted that the word used by Jesus for 'serve,' has, in its Greek meaning, the connotation of cultic worship. It means "to act in accordance with the will of the one accepted as master."⁷⁹ Money is thereby set out as an adversarial alternative to God.

As observed in Mesters' treatment of Abraham,⁸⁰ idolatry also serves as a cover for evil in that it spiritualizes and therefore "hides and legitimizes oppression." It "impedes both the oppressor and the oppressed from becoming aware of oppression, and simultaneously acts as an obstacle to knowing God."⁸¹ Such a god, Mesters maintains, is not the God of Abraham. The god that is revealed through an idol is one that is apathetic toward injustice. Indeed, idols are invented for the very purpose of protecting our own social, class, or family interests. Araya further suggests that the common platitude, "God is love," while a valid and fundamental teaching of the New Testament, has come to mean, in the attitude of resignation to evil, "God is neutral."⁸² However, Araya emphasizes, because the God of the Bible demonstrates an abiding

⁷⁸ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 53.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 61. See also p. 57, and Richard, *The Idols of Death*, p. 21; Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, p. 35.

⁸⁰ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, pp. 57-8.

⁸¹ Richard, *The Idols of Death*, p. 18.

⁸² Araya, "The God of the Strategic Covenant," p. 106.

concern for the poor, it is clear that “God’s love is not neutrality; it is a demand for justice.”⁸³ As we will see below, this thesis posits an inherent connection between love and justice.

The God of Justice—God is Just, God does Justice

Abraham’s God, as Mesters describes Him, is not a god created by people to justify their personal, class, social or political interests. He is not, as Mesters would say, “a decorative God.”⁸⁴ The true God cannot be forced to play this role. The God of biblical revelation is the one who seeks justice for the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, the hurting, the stranger, those who love virtue, the widow and the orphan and who, furthermore, opposes the wicked and frustrates their plans. According to Mesters, Psalm 146:7-9 is a fitting description of the true God.

He gives justice to the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets the prisoners free
and gives sight to the blind.
The Lord strengthens the bent
and loves the virtuous.
The Lord protects the stranger,
sustains the widow and the orphan;
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.⁸⁵

This is the God, Mesters declares, “who entered the life of Abraham...,”⁸⁶ and motivated him to struggle against injustice. The God of Abraham, the only true God,

⁸³ Ibid., p. 110.

⁸⁴ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 59.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

Mesters adds, demands just behaviour from His people because He is just. The converse is also true, as Miranda points out, for to resign oneself to evil and injustice constitutes “a rejection of the God who commands justice.”⁸⁷

The conception of God as just is connected by Gutiérrez to the reality of God’s holiness. Araya, as suggested above, connects it to the love of God, as do Miranda and Tamez.⁸⁸ As holiness signifies being “Wholly Other,”⁸⁹ so the holiness of God refers to His uniqueness in the sense that He alone is God and that He is wholly unlike His creatures, being perfect in virtue and goodness. The connection between holiness and justice is, according to Gutiérrez, further emphasized in the New Testament, where “the word ‘just’ becomes synonymous with ‘holy.’”⁹⁰ Consequently, it is because He is holy that God seeks and commands justice, a command that is rooted, Gutiérrez notes, in the covenant made with Abraham.⁹¹ Here it is shown that the worship of God is inseparable from the practice of justice, demonstrating, as Mesters claims, that God Himself is the foundation of justice in society.⁹²

Where Gutiérrez would posit a symbiosis between the holiness and justice of God, Miranda maintains that the teaching of both the prophets and the apostle John points to an intrinsic unity between justice and love. “One of the most disastrous errors in the history of Christianity is to have tried—under the influence of Greek

⁸⁷ Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, p. 58.

⁸⁸ On Tamez, see *Bible of the Oppressed*, pp. 62-64.

⁸⁹ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p.26, using a phrase popularized by Karl Barth.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹² Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 57.

definitions—to differentiate between love and justice.”⁹³ The teaching of the prophets such as Jer. 22:16—“He defended the cause of the poor and the needy...Is not this what it means to know me? It is Yahweh who speaks.”—and the thesis of John’s first epistle, that is, to know God is to love your neighbour, should be understood, Miranda affirms, to mean exactly the same thing. The biblical notion of love can therefore be understood to mean the practice of justice, a definition which signifies that love does not mean to condescend to another in order to provide their needs but to recognize that every person has a right to be treated fairly. “Only authentic love,” Miranda asserts, “can feel that everything that our neighbor suffers is an intolerable injustice.”⁹⁴ This is made clear, he adds, by the inclusion of the love command in the context of commands concerning justice in Lev. 19 and is further emphasized by Jesus in Luke 10:25-37 when he explains what it means to love one’s neighbour by placing it in the context of a situation of restored justice.

Furthermore, Miranda affirms, that the knowledge of God is mediated by the practice of justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed is not, as Greek philosophy would suggest, because of an antithesis between the immateriality of God and the material limitations of our cognitive faculties. Rather, as 1 John 4:7,8,12,16 and 20 assert, it is because God is revealed only in obedience to the command that we love our neighbour. “God is not God when we try to approach him while avoiding our

⁹³ Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, p. 61.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

neighbour.”⁹⁵ Knowledge of God, therefore, is not a question of epistemology but of praxis, of obeying the command to love God and neighbour and not of adhering to prescribed creeds.⁹⁶

The Mission of Abraham

In light of the kind of God that God is, human injustice is seen as an anti-God, and therefore, anti-life force. By the same token, the theology of liberation insists that “the Reign of God is a reign of life; it is a historical reality (a just life for the poor) and a reality with an intrinsic tendency to be ‘more’ (ultimately, utopia).”⁹⁷ Life, as we have seen, must be understood in the present social context where “poverty means proximity to death...Life means that, with the advent of the Reign, the poor cease to be poor.”⁹⁸ As a category of theology, the Reign of God is central to liberation theology and it is likewise fundamental to the call of Abraham. Abraham’s mission, according to Mesters, is found within the sphere of God’s purpose to promote life, life being understood in the sense defined above. Abraham’s mission, and by extension, the

⁹⁵ Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, p. 65. See also pp. 44-53. This thesis is also discussed in Arthur F. McGovern, “The Bible in Latin American Liberation Theology,” *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, edited by Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983) pp. 463-64. There are, in these thoughts, hints of liberation theology’s insistence on the trinitarian nature of God whose unity is one of a communion between distinct yet equal persons. It is an eternal communion held together by “an infinite encounter of love and life...” in which is found “inspiration for our human relationships.” Boff, “Trinity,” p. 85. As Miranda alludes to above, Boff states with remorse that a gap exists between what the church accepts as dogma and what it knows through its lived experience.

⁹⁶ Moreover, that the knowledge of God can only be mediated through the practice of justice, Miranda believes, is required by the very nature of God. Because God is wholly and absolutely Other, to approach the knowledge of God as if it were data that could be stored indefinitely in the mind would negate His Otherness. See Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, p. 65.

⁹⁷ Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” p. 66.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

mission of God's people, is to "destroy the disorder that corrupts life and prepare the world to be a fitting dwelling place for human beings."⁹⁹ It is a mission that requires human choice, will and action. In other words, it affirms that man is responsible to act in order to transform his environment.

The fact that God is all-powerful does not, Araya protests, absolve human beings of the responsibility of initiative and action; the biblical God is not a substitute for human impotence. Those Christians who passively resign themselves to evil on the premise that to do otherwise would be to challenge the omnipotence of God forces an evasion of historical involvement and struggle. According to the biblical view, Araya says, humanity has been given the task of re-making human history according to justice and love and has been provided with the capacity to do so through the incarnation of the Word. The realm of human responsibility is pictured as a space into which "God has invited human beings 'to act for themselves.' God will not invade that space, or convert it into a controlled zone."¹⁰⁰ That the human task will be victorious is guaranteed by the God who commits Himself in covenant relation to the fulfillment of human hope.

Abraham's mission is understood, in this light, as the historical struggle to reverse evil and "to reconstruct life damaged by humans."¹⁰¹ It is a calling that is rooted in faith in the God who loves justice and life. Faith is not to be understood,

⁹⁹ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁰ Araya, "The God of the Strategic Covenant," p. 108.

¹⁰¹ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 32.

therefore, as an impediment to seeking justice, as a pretext for the justification of evil. The prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus, Miranda insists, clearly affirm that when religious belief prevents us from doing good, when cultus replaces praxis, our religion is vain and we are not worshipping the true God. Rather, he asserts, cultus must follow praxis; that is, ritual worship is secondary to the seeking of justice for people.¹⁰²

While Mesters would concur with Miranda that resignation to evil and injustice cannot be excused on the basis of faith in God, it is doubtful that he would agree with the latter on the order in which they are performed. He is insistent that to practice justice, Abraham needs God. He needs the Word of God which alone has the power “to conquer the forces of evil which corrupt life.”¹⁰³ Interestingly, Mesters claims that without God at the centre of his struggle and the source of his motivation, the fight against injustice itself becomes idolatry, a position that can be seen as the reverse of Miranda’s. While Mesters can harmonize the two, that is, faith and social justice, by saying that neither is complete without the other,¹⁰⁴ Miranda insists that the former cannot legitimately exist on its own, while the latter can because it encapsulates or assumes the former.

It is important to consider why Mesters regards faith as indispensable to the struggle against injustice. Two reasons are given as to why faith is essential. Firstly, it was faith that initiated Abraham’s readiness to hear God’s call and by which he was

¹⁰² See Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, pp. 53-67.

¹⁰³ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ See *ibid*, pp. 58-59.

able to discern the presence of God in the events of his life. Moreover, it was precisely because of the encouragement faith in God gave him that Abraham persisted in his struggle against evil, the evil of not having a land for himself and his descendants. Faith motivated him to liberate himself and his future people from the injustice of his social condition. Abraham's faith, Mesters adds, must not be understood merely as an isolated personal experience of God; rather, it is an experience that is shared with the people who follow him, the indispensable foundation of his movement of liberation. Faith, in this sense, is not the relinquishing of human initiative in favour of divine omnipotence but is an attitude of mind which has potential to change the world.¹⁰⁵

The second reason why faith is essential to social liberation can be seen in Mesters' exposition of sin and injustice. Sin, Mesters suggests, is a condition that arises as a result of people seeking independence from God and is, moreover, the root of all injustice and evil. Therefore, without God and without faith, the struggle against evil cannot strike at the root; it deals only in superficialities of evil.

To exclude God in the fight for justice and unity is like constructing a wheel without an axle. It is useless for the cart of life. Such a form of justice runs risks and has feet of clay. It makes some adjustments on the world, but does not really make a new world. It does not strike at the root of injustice and fails to combat original sin.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ This interpretation of faith can be distinguished from the 'test of faith' hypothesis of popular devotion supported by some exegetes and rejected by Westermann on the premise that Abraham's life prior to his call was never sedentary and that the command to leave was in order to save him from some catastrophe. See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, pp. 148 & 152. Von Rad hints at Abraham's faith when he says that "Abraham is simply to leave everything behind and entrust himself to God's guidance." In this sense, faith is equated with obedience. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 159. In discussing Hebrews 11, where Abraham is commended for his faith by the New Testament writer, Kuschel notes that his is a paradigm of true faith; that is, it claims as certain what is yet only true by promise. This is what enables Abraham to follow God's command to depart from his home. See Kuschel, *Abraham*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁶ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 57.

A movement that seeks social justice without dealing with the root of injustice, that is, the personal sin of living in separation from God, is not Abraham's movement. Abraham's God, he declares, "is a volcano. He rends people from within, since the injustice he combats is not only in others, but also within our very selves."¹⁰⁷ Being unseen, Mesters maintains, "original sin" is perceptible only to the eye of faith.

Mesters traces the source of sin to Adam, employing the traditional vocabulary of original sin. Using an image familiar to his audience, he describes Adam's sin as the will to be independent of God,

believing oneself the master of life, capable of determining, alone, good and evil (cf Gen 2:17; 3:5). It is to seek an independence that brings about death, like the branch that proclaimed its independence from the trunk of the tree and died for lack of life.¹⁰⁸

It is this nascent and fundamental rejection of submission to God and His word that, for Mesters, erupts in every manifestation of evil, in relations between individuals, in the use of religion for self-interest and in social and institutional structures of exploitation and domination of the weak by the strong. It is in one's relation to God, therefore, that justice must first be sought.

The struggle against social injustice, therefore, must be rooted in the primary spiritual battle against the old Adam¹⁰⁹ in all of us. Resonating with the title of his book, Mesters portrays Abraham as on a journey of liberation, a journey symbolically

¹⁰⁷ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ Mesters uses this Pauline phrase repeatedly. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 60, 77, 86.

spoken of as being from Adam to Abraham. Abraham, who initially followed the false gods of human self-interest, only became Abraham progressively as he learned to submit himself completely to “the living and true God.”¹¹⁰ He thereby serves as a model of one who responds to God’s call to become aware of and to conquer the old Adam within him by submitting himself without reservation to God, and so to *become* Abraham.¹¹¹ He cannot conquer Adam in any other way. Mesters sees Abraham’s suggestion that, in the absence of the promised son, God fulfill His promise through Eliezer or Ishmael as symbolic of Abraham’s desire to omit God from the struggle against evil.¹¹² As a way of dealing with sin, whether on the personal or social level, such a method is useless. “Only the struggle of Abraham against Adam has the power to attain the liberation God offers. It is the most radical struggle because it attacks the root as well.”¹¹³ Clearly, Mesters sees the fulfillment of the promise—which translates as a society based on justice—as inseparable from an adversarial encounter with personal sin.

The concept of personal sin is likewise not absent from the theology of liberation as expounded by such eminent theologians as Gutiérrez and Sobrino. In

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹¹¹ Von Rad sees Abraham as a model of absolute obedience to God despite the pull of natural ties. *Genesis*, p. 161.

¹¹² A less radical view, offered by Von Rad, suggests that Abraham’s request for the blessing to rest on Ishmael was an attempt to move God’s sphere of activity from the uncertain to the certain. See *ibid.*, p. 203. Westermann believes that it shows that Abraham cannot comprehend that the promise requires that God be God. *Genesis 12-6*, p. 268.

¹¹³ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 87.

language almost identical to Mesters, Gutiérrez posits that the root cause of social injustice is personal and willful sin.

Sin—a breach of friendship with God and others—is according to the Bible the ultimate cause of poverty, injustice, and the oppression in which men live. In describing sin as the ultimate cause we do not in any way negate the structural reasons and the objective determinants leading to these situations. It does, however, emphasize the fact that things do not happen by chance and that behind an unjust structure there is a personal or collective will responsible—a willingness to reject God and neighbor.¹¹⁴

Injustice is not, Gutiérrez emphasizes, “something branded by a fatal destiny: there is human responsibility behind it.”¹¹⁵ He goes on to suggest that even the most radical social transformation, if indifferent to the issue of personal sin, would be insufficient to eradicate evil. However, he insists, neither is it the case that the personal nature of sin thereby suggests that a “‘spiritual’ redemption that does not challenge the order in which we live”¹¹⁶ deals adequately with the problem. While sin, defined essentially as the negation of love, should correctly be viewed as “the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation,”¹¹⁷ total liberation requires political as well as spiritual transformation, both of which, Gutiérrez posits, are offered to us in Christ’s death and resurrection. The Kingdom or Reign of God, the realm in which liberation is realized, can neither be reduced to historical and

¹¹⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 35.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

social progress nor can the struggle against social manifestations of injustice ignore the fundamental problem of sin.

By connecting the struggle against social injustice with the salvific work of Christ, the theology of liberation seeks to unmask and rediscover the collective dimensions of sin. Archbishop Oscar Romero, no stranger to the deadly and abhorrent effects of structural sin,¹¹⁸ defines it as “the crystallization of individual egoisms in permanent structures which maintain this sin and exert its power over the great majorities.”¹¹⁹ Pope John Paul II has echoed this language in his pronouncements on the responsibility of the church in confronting social problems.¹²⁰ Furthermore, by suggesting that the true Christian meaning of sin is “human damage,”¹²¹ even as Mesters alludes to,¹²² as opposed to the scholastic notion of sin as an “offense against God,” there is introduced the idea that in actual fact, it is the damage caused to people and to life as experienced by people that gives sin its offensive quality. Consequently, there exists the need for human liberation from the damage caused by sin on the level of society in addition to individual forgiveness.

¹¹⁸ Archbishop Romero led a movement of non-violent resistance to political dictatorship in El Salvador in the 1970's in which thousands of civilians, mainly the poor, were brutally tortured and murdered. Romero himself was assassinated before a group of his parishioners while celebrating mass in 1980.

¹¹⁹ José Ignacio González Faus, “Sin” in Sobrino and Ellacuria, *Systematic Theology*, p. 199.

¹²⁰ Faus quotes the pope as declaring that “liberation should overcome ‘sin and the structures of sin that produce it’ (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, nos. 36, 37, 46).” *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200. This may be interpreted as a result of an emphasis on the Cain and Abel narrative of Genesis among liberation theologians. It may also be attributed to the conscious perspective of the entirely modern notion of ‘human rights,’ terminology which is foreign to the Bible, even if it can be argued that the underlying philosophy is not.

¹²² See Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 32.

That faith be effective in striking at the root of evil introduces the necessity, as Mesters see it, for faith to be purified and perfected. Although Abraham had learned, Mesters says, to abandon Eliezer and Ishmael, a greater trial of his faith came to him through God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac.¹²³ Because by faith Abraham could see life beyond the death of his son, the very person in whom the promised future lay, he was able to obey. In Mesters' interpretation, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son at God's command demonstrates the purity of his faith in God as the only means by which the Adam in him—the tendency to operate independently of God—could be conquered. Mesters comments that "Abraham did not react like Adam. In order that the people would be born, he did not try to hold on to Isaac, but rather to the Word of God, which asked for the sacrifice of Isaac."¹²⁴ It was his absolute trust that the God of life was capable of conquering death that brought Abraham through this trial by fire.¹²⁵

¹²³ The "sacrifice of Isaac," or, as it is referred to in Jewish thought, the "binding of Isaac" (*akedah*), has taken pride of place among trials of faith in Jewish as well as Christian theology. That it is a test (of some sort) is clear from the biblical text itself which opens with the words, "Some time later, God tested Abraham" (Gen. 22:1). Until the enlightenment, Westermann notes, the tale has been seen overwhelmingly as positive in both traditions. Immanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard ("The Dispute between the Philosophical and Theological Faculties" and *Fear and Trembling* respectively) introduce the notion that God cannot issue a command that is contrary to His moral law. The voice that speaks to Abraham cannot, therefore, be God's. Westermann himself is convinced that the narrative relates a test and is only mildly concerned with child sacrifice. See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, pp. 353-355. See also Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 237-40, for an analysis that sees the story as being made up of three interrelated themes. From the Jewish tradition, see especially, Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Light Publishing, 1993) and Jon Levenson, *The Sacrifice of the Beloved Son*.

¹²⁴ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 75.

¹²⁵ It is in this context, particularly, that Mesters sees Abraham's movement culminating in the resurrection of Jesus. "There is no affirmation of life," Gutiérrez affirms, "that does not entail passing through death, confronting death." *The God of Life*, p. 14.

Abraham's struggle to sacrifice Isaac is a symbol, Mesters says, of our own battle with unbelief in the God of life.¹²⁶ We all carry an Isaac within ourselves, a spurious foundation of hope, a false source of security, our plans for the future made explicit by our reason and logic, in short, self, the old Adam. One day, we too, will be called to sacrifice it all.

Sooner or later, the time will come for us when God will make a clean slate of everything, to see if we would react like *Abraham* or like *Adam*. He will ask that this Isaac be sacrificed. Carlos, will we react like Abraham? Will we be able to believe that God can bring forth life from death?¹²⁷

Perfect liberation, that is, complete possession of life and victory over the root of evil thus entails the coming into being of a “new man” or, as Gutiérrez refers to it, in the words of scripture, “a ‘new creation’ in Christ (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17).”¹²⁸

The People of Abraham

Although Abraham's position in liberation theology is relatively marginal, he is important to Gutiérrez for his role as ancestor of the people of the covenant. Gutiérrez notes that because the Promise of the covenant, that is, “the efficacious revelation of [God's] love and his self-communication,” was made first to Abraham and accepted by

¹²⁶ Milton Schwantes, writing also from the context of Latin American ‘revolutionary’ theology, takes a similar angle. He sees in all the details of the story an account of Abraham's certainty that “the God of Israel, Yahweh, wants life and not death.” Furthermore, he says, the narrative shows that “[t]he God of life wins out over the god of death.” Consequently, the story is one “of liberation, not oppression.” See Milton Schwantes' aptly named article, “‘Do Not Extend Your Hand against the Child’: Observations on Genesis 21 and 22” *Subversive Scriptures: revolutionary readings of the christian bible in latin america*, edited by leif E. Vaage (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997). See especially, pp. 116-23.

¹²⁷ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 76.

¹²⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 158.

him by faith, Abraham became the father of believers and was placed by the writers of the New Testament “at the beginning of the work of salvation.”¹²⁹ Although fulfilled in Christ,¹³⁰ the Promise continues to find expression in the eschatological promises of the new covenant which have both a historical present and future fulfillment.¹³¹

In establishing the covenant, Gutiérrez comments, God commands Abraham to leave his own country and go to an unknown land in order that God may make of him a people characterized by the practice of justice and equality. Indeed, doing justice for the poor defines them as the people of the covenant. “The identity of Israel is rooted in the relation between the poor and the nation; the chosen people lose their dignity if

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 160. He refers, in this connection, to Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-16 and to several passages in the New Testament including Luke 19:9, Gal. 3:16-19 and Rom. 4. Gen. 15:6, where it is said, *Abraham believed the LORD, and he credited to him as righteousness*, and its N.T. discussion in Rom 4, is particularly pertinent in this regard and presents several difficulties with regard to source analysis. The reader is referred to Van Seters, pp. 249-53, Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, pp. 214-17 and von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 182-83. With regard to interpretation, we may note Westermann’s tacit agreement with the consensus of current exegesis, that is, that “the verse is a late interpretation resulting from theological reflection.” p. 222. Von Rad makes the pertinent observation that “[r]ighteousness is not an ideal, absolute norm which is above men, but rather a term of relationship. Thus, a man is called righteous who conducts himself properly with reference to an existing communal relationship, who, therefore, does justice to the claims which this communal relationship makes on him.” Furthermore, he argues, “[b]elief (faith) is fixing oneself on Yahweh and refers as a rule to God’s future saving act. Belief is an act of trust, a consent to God’s plans in history.” p. 185.

¹³⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 161.

¹³¹ Whereas Christian theology has tended to emphasize the future orientation of eschatological themes and to interpret the New Testament as have a “spiritualizing influence” (Ibid., p.165) on them, Gutiérrez insists that the temporal or historically present dimension of the promises is no less important to the prophets. “Indeed, the prophetic message proclaims and is realized in a proximate historical event; at the same time, it is projected beyond this event” (163). This infers that the future context in which the promises are more fully accomplished does not invalidate their historical realization. The tendency of Christian theology to insist that spiritual redemption is the only true meaning of salvation assumes a matter-spirit dichotomy which is foreign to the biblical worldview. It is not a matter of either temporal or spiritual redemption; rather, Gutiérrez contends, temporal fulfillment of the promises is fundamental to complete fulfillment. “Moreover, it is only in the temporal, earthly, historical event that we can open up to the future of complete fulfillment” (Ibid., p. 167) in which the temporal and spiritual are one. See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 160-68.

they do not establish justice in their midst.”¹³² The prophets, Gutiérrez adds, go so far as to denounce as “foreigners” unjust rulers of their own people. In other words, doing justice so constitutes the identity and purpose of the people of Abraham that failure to defend the rights of the poor amounts to a violation of the covenant and, consequently, a loss of their communal or national identity.

Gutiérrez sees this condition of the covenant as extended to the church, the people of God under the new covenant. God, therefore, continues to reject His chosen people if they fail to practice justice. “The building of the Christian community acquires its full meaning to the extent that this community defends and protects the poor, who are the privileged members of the kingdom; otherwise, there is a contradiction of the very essence of the ecclesial community.”¹³³ In this case, the obligation to defend the rights of the poor is intimately connected with the theme of life, that is, the church’s witness to the resurrection of Christ. Failure to correctly identify the interests of the people and to seek justice on their behalf negates the very meaning of the Lord’s resurrection.

Mesters follows this conception of the people of Abraham, contrasting it with the people of Adam and connecting it with the people born through the resurrection of Christ. The one, the Adamic, feeds on death and the other, the Abrahamic, on life. “Whenever Abraham is called in the past as in the present, a bad people dies away and

¹³² Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 23. In elaborating this point, he refers particularly to Jeremiah 21 and 22. See also Richard, *The Idols of Death*, p. 10.

¹³³ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 23.

a blessed people is announced.”¹³⁴ The people of Abraham communally, whether they be the nation of Israel or the church, are intended to be a people who promote blessing in contrast to those who promote evil. Mesters outlines the differences in the way that these two peoples relate to God, in their attitude to wrongs done against them and in their relationship to the social structure, that is, whether they are oppressors or they struggle against oppression: two peoples, representing two ways of being human. Though the covenant, as Gutiérrez emphasizes, “is made with a people, with a human group, not an individual person,”¹³⁵ yet the struggle is not solely collective because, as Masters indicates, the responsibility of choosing to belong to one or the other is lain upon every individual.

Yet, there is another way in which the ‘people of Abraham’ is understood by Masters. Sarah’s laughter at God’s promise that she, elderly and barren, would give birth to a son has frequently been interpreted in Christian exegesis as unbelief, excusable and natural, but unbelief nonetheless.¹³⁶ In an unusual extension of this

¹³⁴ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 83.

¹³⁵ Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, p. 34.

¹³⁶ “Of course Sarah did not basically renounce Yahweh with conscious unbelief; her laugh is rather a psychologically understandable incident, just as unbelief so often expresses itself.” But, von Rad continues, the “decisive fact both for narrator and reader is that a word of Yahweh was laughed at.” *Genesis*, p. 207. Van Seters remarks simply that “Sarah laughs in disbelief...” *Abraham in History and Tradition*, p. 207. See also Westermann, who notes the connection between the guests’ strong affirmation that Sarah did indeed laugh—after she fearfully tries to deny it—with the naming of Isaac (z-h-k), which means ‘laughter.’ *Genesis 12-36*, pp. 281-82. Savina J. Teubal suggests a most unconventional interpretation of Sarah’s laughter. Her thesis is that Sarah had been a priestess whose station in life precluded motherhood. She laughs “because she knows that a priestess of her station cannot become an ordinary mother like Hagar.” By becoming pregnant, Sarah renounces her Mesopotamian priestess status and adopts another status, that of Hebrew matriarch and another deity, Yahweh, who overrides Sarah’s deity by impregnating her. The transformation from one to the other is mediated through Isaac (laughter). See Savina J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990) p. 106 and pp. 87-114.

notion, Mesters suggests that Sarah's struggle to believe that she could give birth to God's promise bespeaks the struggle of the people to believe that "the future blessed by God"¹³⁷ can be born of them and not of the world's system. "In fact," Mesters explains, "today there are many disbelieving people like Sarah and they laugh. They laugh at themselves and at those who try to build a better future for themselves and for others."¹³⁸ As Sarah symbolizes the people, her laughter denotes their unbelief in themselves and indicates their effort to "escape responsibility for their own destiny."¹³⁹

Thus, the power of the poor to effect historical change is accepted by Mesters as a valid analysis of social reality. Three factors seem to characterize these people: they are poor, they are united and when at their best they have faith that God can use them to bring about positive change in the world.¹⁴⁰ As Mesters puts it, they believe in themselves. The power of the poor to effect social and historical change is a prevalent theme in liberation theology. Leonardo Boff speaks of the people themselves, the oppressed, as the subjects of their own liberation. The process of the people's mobilization for social transformation involves several factors including popular piety, social organization, specifically the organizational structure of base communities, and conscientization.¹⁴¹ Gutiérrez notes with pleasure that the masses of Latin America are now promoting "their own historical alternative," in contrast to "the pessimism and

¹³⁷ Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 66.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁴⁰ See Mesters, *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 54.

¹⁴¹ See Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984) p. 28.

depressing prognoses of those whose description of the situation and its future has its point of departure (and, alas, of arrival) in analysis churned out in political and ecclesiastical ivory towers.”¹⁴² Although repressed, exploited and persecuted, the poor, frequently anonymous masses have the potential to be the real makers of history. It is with these that the church is called to solidarity.

Conclusion

We may conclude by saying that the image of Abraham which emerges in Latin American liberation theology is determined primarily by the method of biblical interpretation adopted by Mesters, a method which is in keeping with that of the Latin American liberation movement as a whole.¹⁴³ His depiction of Abraham shapes a patriarch who looks suspiciously like a contemporary Brazilian peasant farmer. The concerns and context of the one are understood as virtually equivalent to the other. Abraham can thus be identified as a model for how to deal with an environment that is hostile to life.¹⁴⁴ Accordingly, there is little emphasis on Mesters’ part on examining Abraham’s social context too closely; several telling allusions easily betray the desired mirror image of marginalized Christian Brazilians.

¹⁴² Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, translated by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983) p. 76.

¹⁴³ This is the method, discussed earlier, that understands scripture as a reflection of contemporary life in any generation and that looks not for the literal meaning of the text, but to its relevance to the immediate concerns of the believing community. We are prepared to admit, however, that Mesters may take this method further than others in that the distinction between the social context of Abraham and that of contemporary Latin America becomes quite blurred.

¹⁴⁴ By “life,” of course, is meant that vision and interpretation of life as suggested by liberation theology and discussed throughout the chapter.

This observation is not to discredit such an image of Abraham nor to suggest that it is contrived, unrealistic, or manipulative. On the contrary, without doing damage to the spirit of the text or to the essential Christian message, the liberationist's image of Abraham serves to enliven an ancient scripture for a people to whom that scripture has largely been known only second hand or in the service of oppression. Through Mesters' and other liberation theologians' portrayal of Abraham as a fellow traveler, a *compañero* of sorts, the same scripture which has been perceived as a companion of oppression speaks to the people of liberation and hope.

At the same time, in the matter of faith, Mesters stays quite close to the Abraham known to exegetes. Abraham's entire life—his perception of and obedience to God, his social consciousness and the choices he makes for himself and for his family—are deeply rooted in the fundamental core of Abraham's identifying qualify—his faith in the God of life. Therefore, it is not faith, as such, that hinders social action; rather it is how religious faith is interpreted that determines whether it is used as a vehicle for oppression or liberation. In a liberationist understanding, faith is what motivates and sustains a social awareness and posture which challenges and confronts establishment ideology. Thus, we can say that through an interpretation that begins on the foundational premise of a preferential option for the poor, biblical faith itself is liberated from the service of oppression given it by other interpretive methodologies.

CHAPTER THREE

Abraham in Comparative Reflection

Introduction

The reflection on Abraham in Shari‘ati’s thought and in Latin American liberation theology reveals several notable comparisons and contrasts within their respective theologies. Comparisons can be found particularly with regard to the relevance and responsibility of religion in society; contrasts, in connection with the traditional theological distinctives that inform the interpretations. Although the observations we will make in regard to both similarities and differences are significant in themselves, it is the underlying source and cause of the resultant theologies that first draw our attention. We may note two major factors in this regard, namely methodology and theological point of departure. From them develop two theologies of liberation, each distinct in its faithfulness to the central focus of its religion, yet strikingly similar to the other in socio-theological commitments and praxis.

Methodology

To use a term associated with liberation theology, we may observe that both of the subjects of our study practice what has been called “a new way of doing theology.” It is new in the sense that while history, philology, philosophy, and more recently, anthropology, linguistics, psychology and other fields of study have been employed in

the study of scripture and the development of theology, theologies of liberation¹ consciously and consistently employ a sociological frame of reference appropriate to the contemporary context. Consequently, their theologians are trained not only in theology and traditional cognate disciplines, but in the study of contemporary society and sociological methods of analysis. Moreover, a deliberate choice is made with regard to which theory of social analysis will be prioritized. It is reasonable that a theology that responds with worldly hope for the poor and oppressed would be developed in confluence with a congruous social theory that favours the poor and challenges the dominant status quo. Theologies of liberation, therefore, find Marxism a valuable tool for social analysis.

In his comparative study of 'Ali Shari'ati and Latin American liberation theology, Kamal Abdel-Malek observed: "That there is a striking similarity between Shari'ati's critique and that of liberation theologians can be seen in the tendency to infuse new revolutionary fervour into the traditional concepts and precepts of religion through the use of Marxist analysis."² Making use of a study by Gregory Baum,³ Abdel-Malek identifies four categories of Marxist social analysis used by liberation theologians that apply to Shari'ati's social critique. Baum's analysis of liberation

¹ In the plural, theologies of liberation will, for the purpose of brevity, be used to refer both to Latin American liberation theology and to 'Ali Shari'ati.

² Kamal Abdel-Malek, "Towards an Islamic Liberation Theology: 'Ali Shari'ati and His Thought" (Montreal: Institute of Islamic Studies—McGill Centre for Developing Area Studies Discussion Paper No. 55 September, 1988) p. 12.

³ Gregory Baum. "Liberation Theology and Marxism" (Montreal: McGill CDAS Discussion Paper No. 43 November, 1986).

theology recognizes a Marxist framework in the following areas: “1. ideology critique; 2. dependency theory; 3. the preferential option for the poor; 4. humans as the subject of history.”⁴ Abdel-Malek’s analysis of Shari‘ati’s thought concludes that both systems contain “recognizable Marxist categories.”⁵

The analysis pursued above has not consciously attempted to follow these four categories but has been concerned with comparing the two systems on a theological and ideological level. Nevertheless, it can be said that the present study in no way contradicts Abdel-Malek’s proposition but rather augments it through an analysis of a figure of theological importance to the two faith traditions within which the theologies are developed. That Marxist categories of social analysis are employed is therefore not questioned. We are concerned more with determining and seeking out the sources of further levels of affinity. The present research points to several underlying motivations and theological bases that lead us to conclude that the use of Marxist social analysis is but one level, a methodological one, of similarity between the two theologies and that this is so because of a shared common goal. Both Shari‘ati and liberation theology are concerned with the application of theology to third-world liberation struggles where, in agreement with Marxism, a solely metaphysical liberation is understood to contribute to historical oppression.

⁴ Abdel-Malek, “Towards an Islamic Liberation Theology,” p. 4, quoting Baum, “Liberation Theology and Marxism,” p. 2.

⁵ Abdel-Malek, “Towards an Islamic Liberation Theology,” p. 12.

In both the Islamic and Christian situations, then, a theology of liberation is the result of a quest for answers to contemporary social issues. The questions they seek to answer have to do with social, political and economic problems on the macro as well as micro level. Not only does theology here need to provide an answer to the quest for a present, worldly salvation, it must do so for communities of people that stand or fall together and not simply for individuals within a given society. Furthermore, the questions brought to the process of interpretation are born of an identity crisis rooted in contemporary socio-political factors. The meaning of religion and religious history is thus located in a liberating response to the experience of political, cultural and economic oppression. Therefore, we can say that not only is theology here contextualized, it is also thereby indigenized. In the cases of both Iran and Brazil, the questions theology seeks to answer are specific to the historical condition of cultural and political imperialism. Again, it is a sociological framework of oppressor versus oppressed that acts upon the theological process and, to a great extent, determines its outcome.

A second fundamental way in which methodology is instrumental in shaping theologies of liberation is that of hermeneutics. The immediate relevancy of theology and religious history to contemporary social issues reflects a non-literalist method of interpretation of scripture and, in the case of Islam, of authoritative tradition. The historical context and ostensibly objective interpretation of a text or religious memory is handled relatively loosely in preference for a more careful and detailed analysis of its

present significance. In the process, symbolism, analogy, or dynamic equivalence are preferred to literalism as a dominant hermeneutic principle. Consequently, for both Shari'ati and liberation theology, Abraham becomes a preeminent model for whatever ideology is the favoured one in the respective context. In both cases, it is one of liberation from socio-political, economic, cultural and religious oppression.

Theological Point of Departure

We look now at the starting point for our study. The figure of Abraham is a person of tremendous significance to the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Implied in a focus on Abraham is, of course, the theme of monotheism itself. How does this twin starting point of Abrahamic faith in one God connect the two theologies examined in this thesis? How does it distinguish them? To what does this common starting point lead in the development of the respective theologies?

All three religions (although we are concerned here only with Christianity and Islam)—in contrast to some modern scholarship—accept that, in his uncompromising and holistic adherence to monotheism, Abraham represents the prototype of the true monotheist, a model for the contemporary believing community. The manifest connection to Abraham and to monotheism in this holistic sense and its resulting confluent significance suggests a coherence between the two perceptions of the God of Abraham. If Abraham speaks to contemporary Iran and Brazil in the same or an easily

comparable language, is it not one identical God who speaks through him? While Shari‘ati might phrase the question as “Which god is truly God?,” liberation theologians are more inclined to ask, “What kind of God is God?”, implying that other deities, those who care nothing for the poor and oppressed, are not in fact the true God.

Yet, there is a manifest distinction issuing from the very congruity between the two theological systems and this distinction has everything to do with the central theological distinctives of the respective religions. Abraham is the prototype of a spiritual, political and social liberator cast in the image of contemporary socio-religious ideals of liberation, but his is an archetype that finds a more complete fulfillment in a later pivotal event of theological significance. For each theology, the event of ultimate significance is one of self-identity and is, at the same time, unequivocally rejected by the other. For Shari‘ati, Abraham’s movement of liberation, important as it is, is but a shadow that finds its full manifestation in the prophecy of Muhammad. For liberation theology, the apex of liberation is definitively accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Neither system negotiates or compromises on these issues but remains thoroughly traditional and conservative. Shari‘ati’s image of Abraham is, in this sense, thoroughly Islamic; likewise, liberation theology’s is thoroughly Christian. Where convergence is seen is in the radicalism of the contextual sociological interpretations of their respective theological cores.

Therefore, it is fair to say that both theologies are conservative in their adherence to their own faith confession, that which is not affected by time, place or

social context, but relies on the foundation of revelatory meaning. At the same time, both are revolutionary or at least radical, in that which pertains to the contextual sociological significance of the unchanging revelation. What unites and divides them theologically is a consistent use of the same methodology. In the remainder of this chapter we will compare some of the specific similarities and differences in the theological ramifications of the image of Abraham in more detail.

Similarities

As mentioned briefly above, the image of Abraham fashioned by a particular interpretive methodology leads back to a corresponding image of God. Is it, then, the character of Abraham's God that determines the man, or is it the commitments and character of the man that defines what kind of God he worships? It is difficult to answer this question conclusively. Both theological systems understand that Abraham stands on the side of the poor and oppressed because that is where God stands, but also that we can determine that God is on the side of the oppressed through examining the life of Abraham.

However, the fact that God does not despise or exploit the weak, but rather defends their rights can be supported by reference to evidence apart from the life of Abraham itself. For example, Shari'ati advances the argument that the oneness of God for which Abraham is so zealous necessitates a corresponding oneness of society that eliminates the possibility of social contradictions, a position not alien to Islam but

characteristic also of Marxism. Gustavo Gutiérrez, on the other hand, contends that compassion for the poor and the needy constitutes the very identity of the covenant people, a proposal that finds its roots squarely in theology. This would suggest that it is the character of God that determines that of Abraham and not vice versa.

However, in both systems, compassion, pity, and concern for the poor and the needy do not adequately represent their vision of God. For theologies of liberation, the compassion and justice of God means that God is a God who empowers and liberates the poor through that self-same empowerment. The poor and oppressed are not to be content in their condition; rather, they are to see their state as a result of human injustice that denies the absoluteness of God's moral authority and the reality of His ontological nature. For Shari'ati, the latter is the more critical violation for it is the absolute oneness of God that determines the logic and imperative of social equality. For liberation theology, God's moral authority prescribes the obligation of obedience to God's moral law of justice and brotherhood. But the lines are sometimes blurred. Kenneth Cragg finds a noticeably "Muslim" quality in José Miranda's insistence "that the being of God is to command and the being of man is to be commanded."⁶ Similarly, Cragg finds a correspondence between Miranda's view of the moral authority of God and Shari'ati's view of the ontology of God's unity and their connection to social justice.

Miranda's sense of the divine claim registered in Mexico has features close to Shari'ati's sociological implications of *Tauhid*, or divine

⁶ Kenneth Cragg. *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'an* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985) p. 74.

unity, interpreted as opposition to all usurping powers and forces as these degrade and deprive one's fellow man.⁷

The affinity of these two positions is further highlighted by the fact that, in either case, whether of the divine right to command or of the social implications of the oneness of the divine being, violation is expressed as idolatry. In Shari'ati's system of thought, monotheism is contravened when human beings claim the divine right to absolute rule, or when society, as a reflection of the divine being, misrepresents God through social contradiction. In liberation theology, idolatry is expressed as the rule of the gods of self-interest resulting in the oppression of the poor and denial of their right to life. Idolatry consumes the poor as it sanctions their oppression. As a violation of monotheism, then, idolatry in both theological systems posits a correspondence between the political and spiritual realms where submission to a given political rule implies the necessity of submission to its god and where religion, falsely conceived, is invoked in legitimization of injustice.

In Cragg's judgment, the two systems are united in their commitment to militancy "against what thwarts [God's] Lordship in society" and in their aversion to "a mere conforming piety."⁸

There is here the same impatience with abstract theology, the same accent of passion and protest, the same demand that worship, in an unjust context, must mean its correction in God's Name if it is not to become a hollow form and a virtual idolatry. Religion in both cases is hypocrisy if it is not a social imperative received as divine.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

⁹ Ibid.

For both systems, Abraham embodies the antithesis of hypocritical religion. He demonstrates the liberating consequences of human cosmic and social awareness and of absolute commitment to the Lordship of God and to the responsibility of earthly vicegerency. For Latin American theologians, the 'kingdom' in which Abraham believes and for which he struggles promotes the reign of God on earth. It is a reign that offers life for the poor and their empowerment to actuate communal liberation from the forces of death. For Shari'ati, Abraham is *insān*; he worthily fulfills his responsibility to represent the divine will and rule on earth.

What is noticeable in this context is an emphasis in both theologies on commands given by God and less on creeds. While it is true to say that Shari'ati's ideology relies significantly on the Islamic confession that there is no god but God, he interprets this creed in terms of praxis. It is insufficient merely to confess with the mouth or to believe in the heart; rather, confession is actuated through the ideology of social justice and commitment to communal action. Creed is thus transformed into command. However, the emphasis on command is even more clearly expressed in Shari'ati's insistence on the importance of the command to forbid what is evil and to promote what is good. For Shari'ati, it is a command that is perpetually incumbent upon every believing Muslim and has reference to the social context in which Muslims find themselves. Furthermore, it implies that the poor and the oppressed are the agents of their own liberation because it is they who are responsible to obey the command that challenges oppression.

The same phenomenon can be observed in the case of liberation theology where orthopraxis determines orthodoxy. In this case, the command is to love God and one's neighbour, with love being quite synonomous with justice. Seeking justice for one's neighbour, with whom one lives in community, is thus the fulfillment of the law and failure to obey this two-fold command makes a mockery of one's worship and profession of faith in the God of justice. According to Miranda, God "is accessible only in the act of justice."¹⁰ It is not necessary, as might be assumed, to conclude from this that faith is expendable; rather, it is, as the New Testament writer states it, that "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."¹¹

In both instances, faith acts as a motivation and inner strength for doing what God commands. If theologies of liberation can be considered revolutionary, then it is here that revolution is located. To revolutionize religion is simply to allow faith to stimulate the believing communities and provoke them to radical obedience on the level of society and politics, and their individual members to what is considered the essential core of religion. It is to expect that the demands of religion are most fully satisfied by creating a society in which oppression and violence against the weak is overturned and righteousness and justice reigns. It is to believe that ordinary people, through radical obedience to God, are the most powerful agents of social change. So say Shari'ati and liberation theology.

¹⁰ José Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, translated by John Eagleton (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974) p. 48.

¹¹ James 2:17.

Disregard of the moral commands of God and their substitution with the selfish inclinations of one's own affections is irreligion and idolatry. Abraham vividly portrays the power of faith to overcome self in his call to sacrifice the son of his love. This son, whether named as Ishmael or Isaac, symbolizes the threat of internal idolatry. Were he to come between Abraham and the will of God, the latter must take precedence. Shar'ati expresses it as rebellion against the self, an act of courage that announces to the oppressors that nothing, not even the greatest of human affections, can turn a true worshipper of God from absolute commitment to truth. The implications are obvious: there is no shame in martyrdom.

Carlos Mesters sees Isaac, as the biblical writer expresses it, as the son of promise. Abraham's obedience to God's command to sacrifice him demonstrates that the foundation of his hope for the future, for a better world, is in God alone and not even in God's gifts. Faith tells him that obedience to God always leads to life and sacrifice is not an impediment to life; false hope is. According to this model also, sacrifice may require martyrdom. However, that Shar'ati places Ishmael in this important role and liberation theology Isaac is not merely a case of 'a rose by any other name.' These choices indicate a deeper incongruity that discloses the presence of a series of theological non-negotiables in both systems. We will now examine some of these distinctions.

Differences

Shari‘ati’s choice of Ishmael as the chosen sacrifice is not necessarily predetermined by Islamic precedent. As we have noted, Firestone shows conclusively that several, in fact, nearly half of all traditionists, Shi‘i and Sunni, identify Isaac as the intended victim.¹² That Ishmael represents the challenge to Abraham’s absolute devotion and that Isaac is not so much as mentioned by Shari‘ati has, it may be suggested, more to do with Shari‘ati’s interpretation of Ishmael himself, an interpretation that is clearly distinct from that of Mesters. Shari‘ati’s understanding of Ishmael is inseparable from the significance he attributes to Hagar, Ishmael’s mother. A despised, marginalized woman of slave origins, Hagar represents to him the elevation of oppressed classes of every kind. In spite of who she is, God chooses her to be the mother of the son Abraham so desperately desires in order that he might carry on Abraham’s revolutionary movement.

The subsequent call to Abraham to sacrifice his son is symbolic of the perpetual oppression of the weak. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice with his own hands him whom the oppressor would otherwise kill shows that Abraham’s movement cannot be overcome; what the oppressor sees as a danger and threat to their rule, for Abraham becomes his most vulnerable point of weakness. To kill him is to disallow that vulnerability to be exploited by the enemy. Abraham will, instead, turn it into strength

¹² See Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) pp. 170-78.

and courage. It is, one might say, an act of defiance against man as much as obedience toward God.

Mesters' understanding of Ishmael, on the other hand, does not see his marginalized position as something that enhances his relationship to Abraham's mission. Rather, Ishmael represents the fruit of Abraham's reliance upon himself and not on God, a view that does not depart from historic Christian interpretation of Ishmael. What might provide a natural opportunity for liberationist exegesis, for Mesters remains largely within the realm of tradition and can be understood to contradict a liberationist reading of the narrative. The rejected son of the unworthy slavegirl is rejected still, and the story is told from the perspective of the son of the upper class woman, the privileged upstanding member of Abraham's household. According to this theology, Ishmael's marginalization is justified and is not to be the target of activist faith. On the contrary, his very marginalization and existential rejection anticipates his rejection on the theological level and therefore the focus shifts from a struggle on behalf of the oppressed to a struggle against inconsistency of faith.

One might say that Mesters is more concerned here to be consistent with historic Christian interpretation of the Ishmael-Isaac relationship and to fit this interpretation into a liberationist framework without derailing the whole theological system as it normally stands than he is with developing a new theology. The symbolic significance that he subsequently gives to Isaac, namely, the importance of having faith in God's promises despite appearances to the contrary and believing that God is the

God of resurrection and life, further confirms Mesters' position within common Christian interpretation of this, the greatest trial of Abraham. Yet, as we have noted above, for both Mesters and Shari'ati, the scene of the sacrifice is the most lucid display of single-minded obedience to the Lordship of God and denial of any human affection that impedes such devotion.

Another area of distinction that can be noted between Shari'ati and liberation theology is found not so much in the theologies themselves but in their respective proponents. In the case of Shari'ati, we see a layperson, furiously antagonistic to the clerical class of his religious community. In Shari'ati's view, if religion is to be progressive and to inspire social progress it will have to do it without the leaders of the community. Their hypocrisy, it seems, is too far gone to accommodate radical change. Furthermore, in Shari'ati's symbolic interpretation of religion, the clerical class is itself part of a three-fold Satanic trinity of evil. A struggle against oppression necessarily involves a struggle against official representatives of religion.

Liberation theologians of Latin America, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly 'men of the collar.' They are priests, bishops, monks, nuns, biblical scholars, men and women within the hierarchical structure of the church. They seek to bring change first to the way they themselves do and teach theology, and they make no attempt to persuade the people who listen to them to fight against the church. On the contrary, they are encouraged to be the church in new and radical ways of commitment and community. Their movement, one might say, is therefore less revolutionary than it is

revivalistic, and their commitment to authoritative text and tradition are actually quite conservative.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

The foregoing observations inevitably cause one to question the sources of congruity and the bases of incongruity. We have suggested above that methodology, both in its use of a Marxist social framework of analysis and in its hermeneutical approach, is of some consequence to our conclusions. We have also observed an analogous understanding of the character of the one true God, who is understood to be the God of Abraham, and of the definition of idolatry. Furthermore, we have noted a parallel recognition that mankind enjoys both the duty and privilege of implementing the divine will on earth and an attendant anti-determinism. Both systems see determinism as the accessory of oppressive religious systems used to legitimize and justify social inequalities. Finally, we have understood that both theologies see the spiritual merits of sacrifice and derive a theology of martyrdom, subtly or not so subtly, from the intended sacrifice by Abraham of his son.

Concomitantly, we have detected a distinction in the defining theologies in which Abraham is located, particularly in the context of the sacrifice and in his relationship to the future of his movement. Although Shari'ati is less bound by tradition than is Gutiérrez or Mesters, neither system interprets Abraham solely within the perimeters of his own epoch and apart from the wider theological corpus of the religious tradition in which he is made to function as the primeval model. Both tradition and contemporary social context are operative in the interpretive process and

they are so for both Shari‘ati and liberation theology independent of each other. In light of this, it would be untenable to suggest that one, namely Shari‘ati, simply borrowed from the other and adapted it to his own religious tradition. That each one sustains the fundamental distinctives of his own religious tradition suggests a confluence of hermeneutical approach rather than mimicking of content.

Furthermore, given the above observations—the affinity of methodology and of sociological and theological implications—one may ask why, for Shari‘ati, Abraham is a great revolutionary, while for Mesters, he is a socially conscious migrant worker. Can this difference be attributed to theological or social context or is it merely a matter of image-bearing according to the ideological persuasions and objectives toward which each one seeks to move his target audience? A combination of all three would appear to be the most reasonable conclusion. For example, the theological context of Shi‘ite Islam having, according to one school of thought, an emphasis on political activism, would seem to lend itself to a portrayal of a figure of Shi‘i religious history as a model of a political revolutionary. Whereas, for Christianity, no such precedent exists within mainstream historical theology.

However, social context and the aims of the ‘theologians’ are also apparent in explaining this distinction. A migrant-worker Abraham would be of little use to Shari‘ati although the inverse, that is, a theory of revolutionary *tawhid*, may not be so unsuitable to Mesters, at least in as far as *tawhid* signifies the absence of other, rival

gods.¹ The point to be made here is that while the image created of Abraham must be theologically consistent to some degree, it must also be socially relevant and serve the interest of its maker. This is not to say that the images are contrived. It is, however, to acknowledge that in the development of any indigenous theology, which is the express aim of both Shari‘ati and liberation theology, social context plays an indispensable and unavoidable role in determining the final product.

That these theologies are heavily dependent on their social context is clearly in evidence. Added to this, the observation that their tools of analysis suggest a predominance of relative and temporal variables leads us to ask what contribution Shari‘ati and liberation theology make to theology by the use of such tools. How do their methodologies enhance their interpretations and commend them to the goal of a liberative theological discourse, which is, as liberation theologians suggest, to “discover and activate the *transforming energy* of the biblical texts.”² What do Shari‘ati and liberation theology do with what we may identify as the primary sources

¹ The God who seeks justice for the oppressed is, according to Mesters, the only true God. “This is our God! And this God truly exists. And there is no other besides him (cf. Is 44:6).” *A Journey of Liberation*, p. 58. However, the notion of *rawhid* as the ontological nature of the one God cannot be applied to Mesters within the larger framework of Trinitarian theology as expounded in liberation theology and discussed briefly in footnotes 48 and 95 of Chapter Two. Were Mesters to include in his discussion of the God of Abraham reference to the Trinitarian communion as a prototype of the social communion that is the express aim of his theology, a quite different conclusion would have to be made. In fact, where Shari‘ati sees strict monotheism as a political solution, liberation theology may be said to see it as a political problem. “A certain understanding of theological monotheism, inasmuch as it conceives God as the vertex of a pyramid of all beings, is the upshot of political and religious experiences characterized by authoritarianism and despotism....In the case of Latin America, we perceive how great a change in individual and social reality will be required if that reality is to become a sacrament of the holy Trinity. Here are the Trinitarian roots of a Christian commitment to the transformation of society;....” Leonardo Boff, “Trinity,” *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993) pp. 76 and 77.

² Clodovis Boff, “Methodology of the Theology of Liberation,” *Systematic Theology*, p. 17.

of inspiration, that is, the fact of God, His existence, His oneness and His will to reveal Himself to humanity, as well as the fact of Abraham, his faith and his call to surrender unconditionally to God, that other theologies using other hermeneutical principles have not done?

The answer, we may suggest, is that they show us how a story of such fundamental significance to monotheistic religious traditions as the story of Abraham, whose meaning has for centuries been understood in a particular way, can be given fresh significance for a new generation. They demonstrate that a new hermeneutic, one that moves freely between text, context, and reader, and that interprets revelation within the material and critical context of time and place, can provide the tools and strategy by which long-held tradition can be applied in an immediate way. Furthermore, though not prior to soteriological liberation in terms of value, social liberation, due to its apparent urgency, becomes the hermeneutic key of liberation theologies, Islamic and Christian.

Of priority here, methodologically, is the *application* of faith to the concrete realities of history. The literal explanation of the text itself, the work of biblical exegetes, is important; but it is the stepping stone to the 'real' task of biblical interpretation. That task, Mesters explains, is to discover the spiritual significance of a given text, a form of exegesis, he says, that was practiced by the Church Fathers. This significance does not lie in the literal meaning of the words as they were originally given, but is discovered through an act of 'revelation.' "It is not the product of

calculations and studies, but also a gift received through faith in the resurrection. It does not spring from the text only, but also from the Spirit acting in the vision of the person who reads the text.”³ In this hermeneutic of the ‘spirit’ versus the ‘letter,’ symbolism plays an important role. Mesters speaks of “the value of the symbolic”⁴ in discovering the “*life meaning*,” of scripture, the ‘spirit’ beneath the ‘letter.’ Likewise, Shari‘ati’s reliance on symbolism was noted by Steven Benson as a feature of his mysticism in the service of revolution, and by Shari‘ati himself throughout his highly metaphorical exposition of the *hajj*.

In conclusion, Shari‘ati and Mesters bring into question the validity of a so-called objective hermeneutics that denies the reality of contextual influence and demonstrate the results of an approach to revelation put forward in the writings of Paul Ricoeur. “Ricoeur,” Mark Wallace writes, “understands *revelation* in performative, not propositional, terms: it is an event of new meaning between text and interpreter, rather than a body of received doctrines under the control of a particular magisterium.” In this revelatory event, “understanding occurs in the to-and-fro dialogue between text and interpreter whenever the interpreter is willing to be put into question by the text and risk openness to the world of possibilities the text projects.”⁵

³ Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, translated from the Portuguese by Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989) p. 27.

⁴ Mesters, “How the Bible is Interpreted in some Basic Christian Communities of the Common People,” *Concilium: Conflicting Ways of Interpreting the Bible*, edited by Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (New York: The Seabury Press, October, 1980) p.42.

⁵ Mark I. Wallace, “Introduction,” Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, translated by David Pellauer and edited by Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 9.

Shari'ati and liberation theology may be said to enact this dialogue within their own systems of interpretation. Furthermore, a comparison between the two demonstrates also an unconscious dialogue in process between Islam and Christianity that reaches beyond polemics to a deeper level of religious inquiry. Both, as far as these two theologies are concerned, are essentially asking the same fundamental question, that is, what does it mean to be religious? and attempting to provide an answer. "What does it mean," Gutiérrez asks, "to be a Christian [or a Muslim]? What does it mean to be Church [or the *umma*] in the unknown circumstances of the future?"⁶ In other words, how does one and how does a believing community express its faith in God unhypocritically in the context of the time in which it lives? Alternatively, the question can also be phrased as, what does it mean to be human on God's earth? These are, indeed, questions of both Islam and Christianity, though they are not restricted to either.

The answers offered by Shari'ati and liberation theology speak of an integration between faith and life; they speak of the necessity of concreteness and genuineness in the expression of religious faith.

If we are Muslims, if we are Shi'is, and believe in the Islamic and Shi'i precepts, and yet those precepts have had no positive results upon our lives, it is obvious that we have to doubt our understanding of them. For we all believe that it is not possible for a nation to be Muslim, to believe in Ali and his way, and yet to gain no benefit from such a belief.⁷

⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 50.

⁷ Shari'ati, *Intezār, Mazhab-i i-tirāz*, Tehran, 1971. Quoted and translated by Mangol Bayat-Philipp, "Shi'ism in Contemporary Iranian Politics: The Case of Ali Shari'ati," *Towards a Modern Iran: Studies in*

To be a Christian is to accept and to live—in solidarity, in faith, hope and charity—the meaning that the Word of the Lord and our encounter with him give to the historical becoming of mankind on the way toward total communion. To regard the unique and absolute relationship with God as the horizon of every human action is to place oneself, from the outset, in a wider and more profound context. It is likewise more demanding.⁸

Faith is profoundly relevant, not only for the individual but for society. It is also, as we noted earlier, an equalizer. True faith creates a brotherhood/sisterhood of humankind that knows no distinctions based on social class, race, gender, wealth or power. For faith to be genuine, it must result in good for society as a whole, if not always for the individual. Indeed, where the individual is concerned, faith can be costly; it could require sacrifice, even martyrdom, the ultimate expression of uncompromising commitment.

Finally, to be religious means to successfully integrate faith (interpreted as unconditional surrender to God) and human action in the quest for the betterment and advancement of those not normally privileged by the prevailing social order. We refer again to Cragg's observation that in both Shari'ati and liberation theology "there is no mistaking that theology [or religion] means a right society, that to acknowledge God is to require a conformed humanity."⁹ Such are, as Cragg suggests, sentiments that are "eminently 'Islamic'" as well as Christian. According to an understanding of the God

Thought, Politics and Society, edited by Elie Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1980) p. 156.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

⁹ Cragg, *The Pen and the Faith*, p. 74.

of Abraham as interpreted by Shari‘ati and liberation theology, one might equally say that they are eminently and authentically divine.

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